

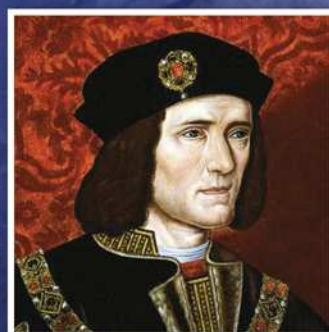
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to Richard III: stories
of the monarchs of
the Middle Ages*



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Dynasties rose and fell. Father was pitted against son, wife against husband. The English fought the French, Welsh and Scots. Peasants revolted against the wealthy, church clashed with state, barons battled kings, and gruesome deaths faced those who picked the wrong side. Welcome to medieval Britain.

After the death of William the conqueror's last son, Henry I, England experienced four tumultuous centuries as a succession of kings and queens – from Henry's daughter Matilda to Richard III, whose fall signalled the dawn of the Tudor era – fought to win and hold the throne.

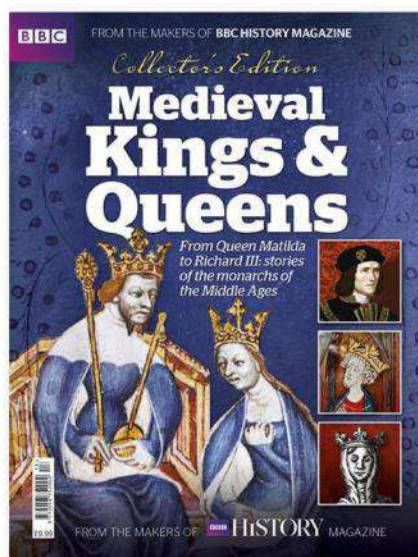
In this collector's edition we get beneath the skin of these fascinating rulers. We examine the **caring side of Henry V**, the victor of Agincourt, and ask whether the **Black Prince was a noble hero or a rampaging villain**. We explore the stories of royal woman unafraid to fight for their thrones and families: **Isabella**, rebellious queen of Edward II; **Eleanor of Aquitaine**, who set her sons against her husband; and **Matilda**, whose claim to the crown caused the bloody 'Anarchy'. We meet near-legendary **Welsh prince Owain Glyndŵr** and famed Scot **Robert Bruce**, who both launched rebellions against English rule. And we aim to find the truth about **Richard III**, 'Bad' King John and the crusading **Richard the Lionheart**.

Medieval Kings & Queens compiles and updates articles that have appeared previously in *BBC History Magazine*, along with new content written specially for this edition. I hope you enjoy it.

Rob Attar

Editor

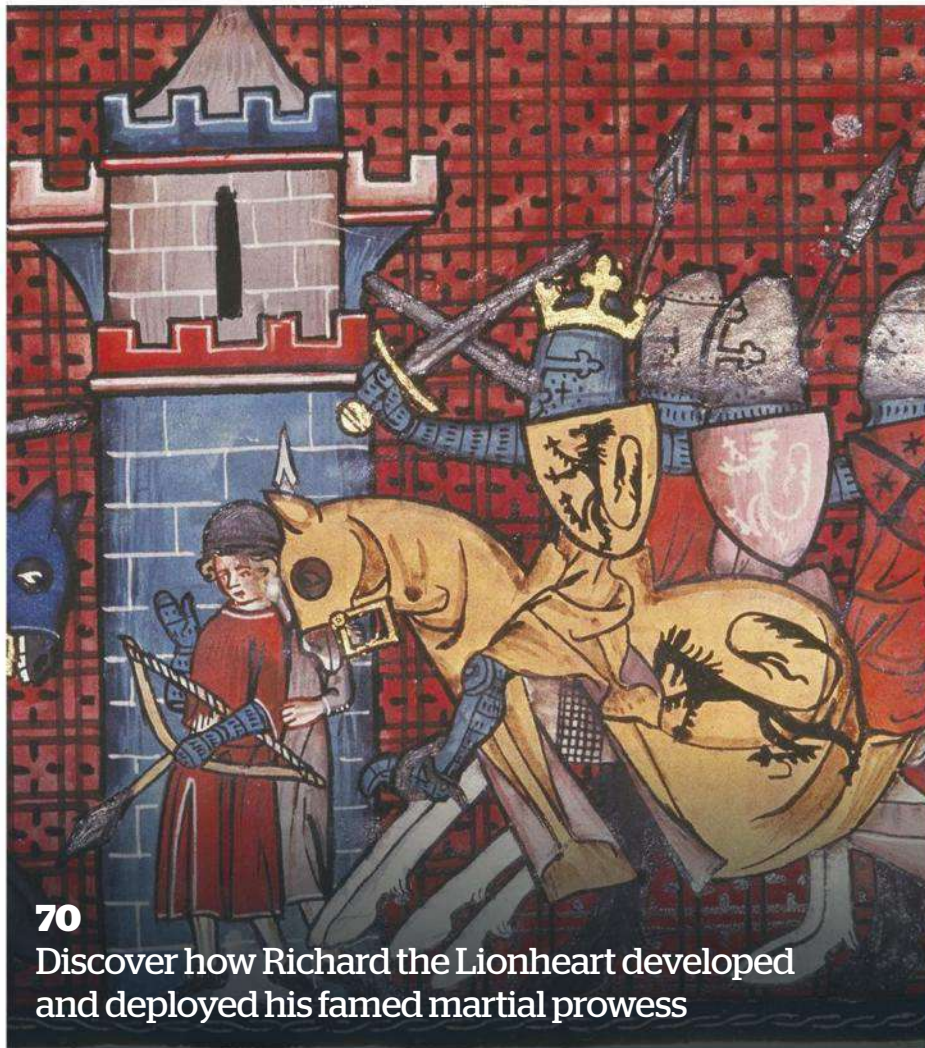
BSME Editor of the Year 2015, Special Interest Brand



"The truth of the lives of these monarchs frequently **lies buried beneath centuries of myth and invention**"

Historian **KATHRYN WARNER** discusses why tracking down original source material about medieval kings and queens is tricky but rewarding work, on page 114

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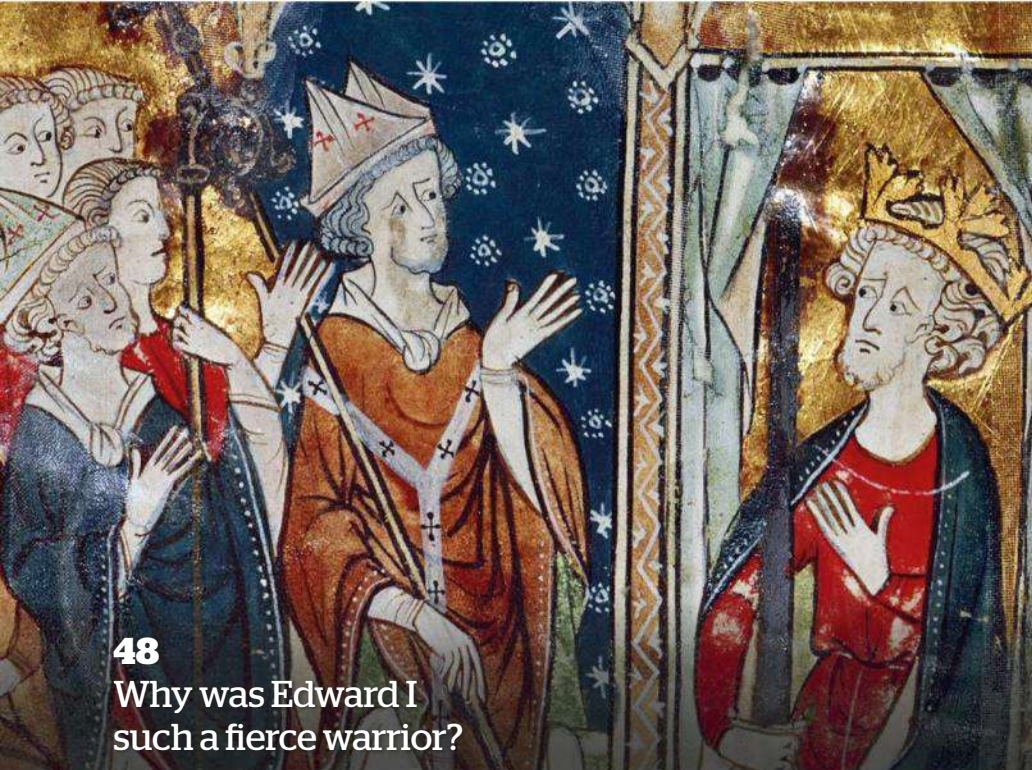
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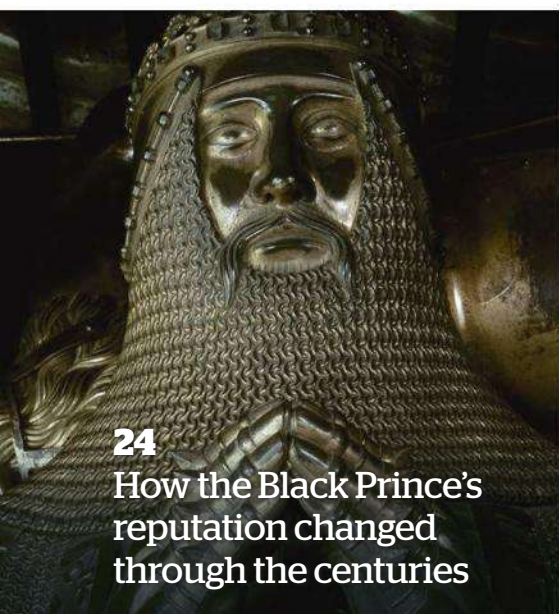
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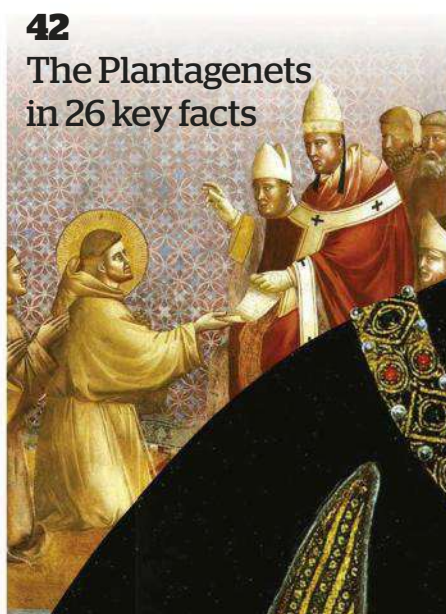
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From Middle Ages to modern era

Nicholas Vincent traces the tumultuous history of Britain's medieval monarchs, from the Norman conquest to the battle of Bosworth



William the Conqueror, illustrated in a 15th-century manuscript



1154

The son of Matilda and Geoffrey of Anjou succeeds Stephen as **King Henry II** (above), bringing to the throne the **Plantagenet dynasty** – which rules England and large parts of France for the next 250 years.



1100

1150

1135

Stephen of Blois, nephew of Henry I, claims title as King of England, usurping a throne previously promised to Henry's daughter Matilda. Twenty years of civil war follow, ending with the Treaty of Winchester confirming Matilda's son, Henry, as Stephen's heir to the English crown.



Stephen of Blois, depicted in a 15th-century stained-glass window in Canterbury Cathedral

1170

Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, is murdered in his own cathedral church. The killing exposes underlying tensions between church and state. **Henry II's son, also Henry ('the Young King'), is crowned as associate king** – an act that doesn't prevent him, two years later, from launching a rebellion against his own father together with two brothers and his mother, Henry's queen Eleanor of Aquitaine.



A 15th-century alabaster panel shows the murder of Thomas Becket in 1170

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES/BRIDGEMAN



Philip Augustus is crowned at Reims Cathedral in a 15th-century French manuscript

1180

Philip Augustus becomes King of France. During his 43-year reign Philip paves the streets of Paris, encourages scholarship and the arts, builds the first royal residence on the site of the Louvre, and **confirms Paris as the intellectual powerhouse of Europe.**

1204

Philip Augustus, in part through his own skill and in part through the failings of his Plantagenet rivals, **conquers Normandy from Richard's brother and successor, King John.** The Anglo-Norman connection established since 1066 is violently severed.

1215

Magna Carta is negotiated at Runnymede – a settlement bringing to an end the civil war between John and his barons that broke out after victories won by Philip of France had plunged England into chaos. Though short-lived as a peace treaty, in legal and political terms Magna Carta survives. In theory, at least, English kingship is henceforth placed under the rule of law.

1200



The seal of Richard I, known as the Lionheart for his reputation for military prowess and leadership

1191

Having conquered Cyprus, **Richard 'the Lionheart', Henry II's son and successor, arrives in the Holy Land.** He comes within a hair's breadth of recapturing Jerusalem, but on his journey home from crusade is imprisoned and ransomed in Germany, provoking a crisis in English public finances.

1212

The **battle of Las Navas de Tolosa is won by the Christian kings of Spain** in a great victory over the Islamic rulers of Al-Andalus – a significant pointer to the future Christian reconquest of Spain and a rare instance of co-operation between the rival Christian rulers of Castile, Aragon, Navarre and Portugal.

The battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, as imagined in a later mural





1245

Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (pictured above) – ruler of Sicily and Germany, and considered a severe threat to the papacy – is deposed by the pope. His deposition, followed in 1250 by his death, **plunges both Italy and Germany into crisis**, paving the way for Charles of Anjou, brother of French King Louis IX, to seize the Sicilian throne.



A contemporary miniature shows James of Aragon and Roger of Lauria off the coast of Sicily during their campaign to win back the island from the Angevins in the War of the Sicilian Vespers

1282

The French garrison of Palermo is massacred in the so-called Sicilian Vespers. The outcome is a **Mediterranean diplomatic revolution, its effects spreading from Spain to Byzantium**. While the French struggle to maintain their hold over Naples, the kings of Aragon seize Sicily and the Balearic islands. The scene is set for centuries of Franco-Spanish rivalry to dominate the Italian peninsula.

1250

1265

In the midst of civil war against the English King Henry III, **Simon de Montfort summons a 'Parliament'**. Though by no means the first public assembly summoned to debate taxation or policy, Montfort's Parliament was the first to include representatives from counties and boroughs. This was to remain the norm for the English House of Commons through to the 19th century and beyond.



The seal of Simon de Montfort, whose 'Parliament' of 1265 prefigured the House of Commons

1300

1290

Margaret, 'Maid of Norway' and claimant to the throne of Scotland, dies – opening the way for Edward I of England to manipulate the succession to the Scottish throne. Having conquered Wales, Edward now attempts the same in Scotland. One of the claimants, **Robert Bruce, is provoked into rebellion and in 1306 is crowned King of Scots**.



King John II of France is shown in defeat at the battle of Poitiers in a 15th-century manuscript



Charles IV of France, pictured at his coronation. Succession disputes after his death in 1328 led to the Hundred Years' War



A detail from an illustration depicting Ottoman victory over Christian forces at the battle of Nicopolis

1327

King Edward II of England is deposed and murdered following disastrous campaigns in Scotland and a descent into a tyranny by the king's favourites. In France the death of Charles IV the following year leads to the succession of the house of Valois excluding all female claimants, including Isabella, Edward's widow. **This sows the seeds of the Hundred Years' War** as Isabella's son Edward III and his successors claim to rule as kings in both England and France.

1396

Christian forces led by the rulers of Hungary and Wallachia (Romania), commanded by Sigismund, future Holy Roman Emperor, are defeated at Nicopolis in Bulgaria. Effectively **the last gasp of medieval crusading**, this loss leaves the Balkans as an Ottoman enclave for the next 500 years.

1350

1356

Edward the 'Black Prince', son of Edward III, defeats King John II of France in the battle of Poitiers – widely assumed to seal victory for the English in the Hundred Years' War. In the meantime, and in the aftermath of the Black Death, much of western France is laid waste.



Radical preacher John Ball at the head of the Peasant's Revolt as it faces the king's troops in a late-15th-century illustration from Froissart's *Chronicles*

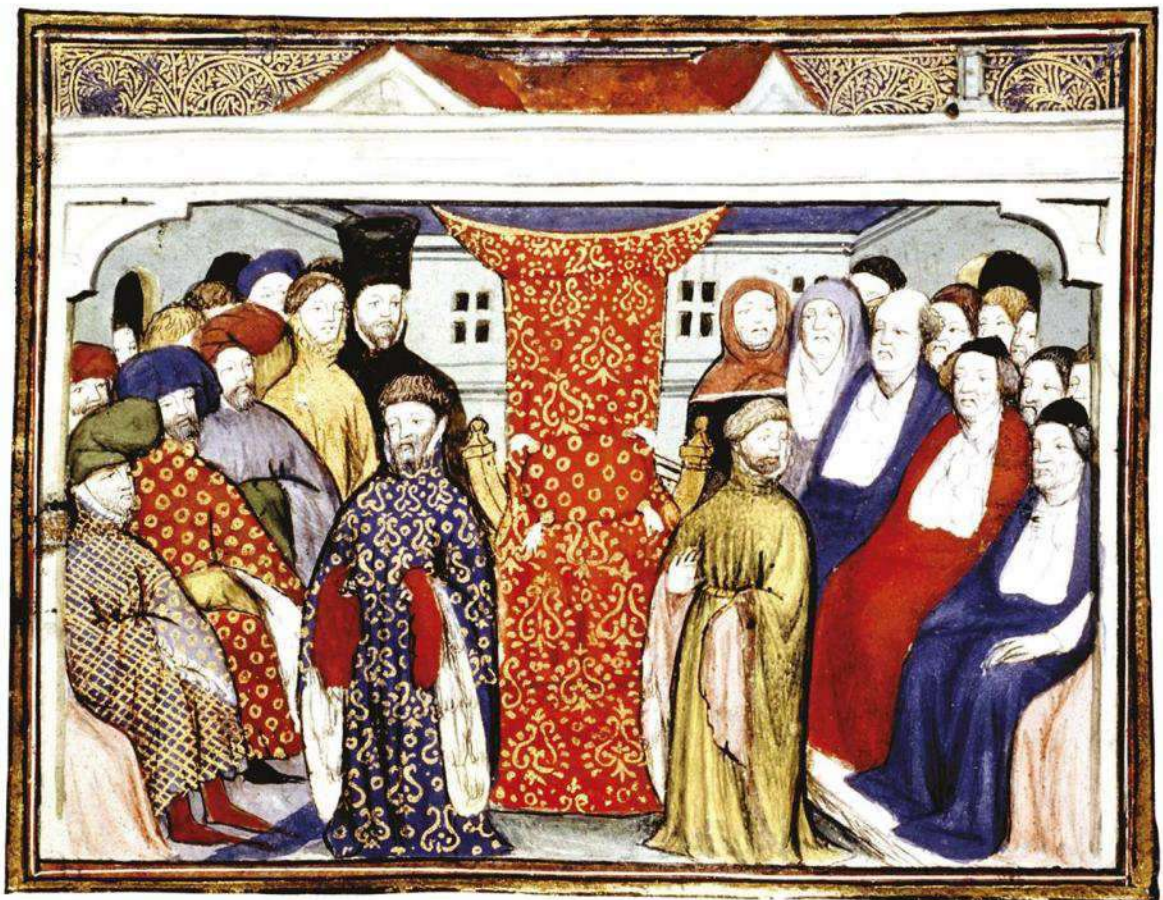
1381

The Peasant's Revolt breaks out across much of southern England. The mob kills the archbishop of Canterbury and threatens London with looting. The revolt ends when rebel leader Wat Tyler is killed following an unsuccessful interview with the young Richard II at Smithfield.

1399

Richard II is deposed by his barons, having descended into tyranny. His cousin, Henry of Bolingbroke of the house of Lancaster, **takes the English throne as Henry IV**, ushering in a century of rebellion and civil war between members of the house of Lancaster and their rivals, most notably their cousins of the house of York.

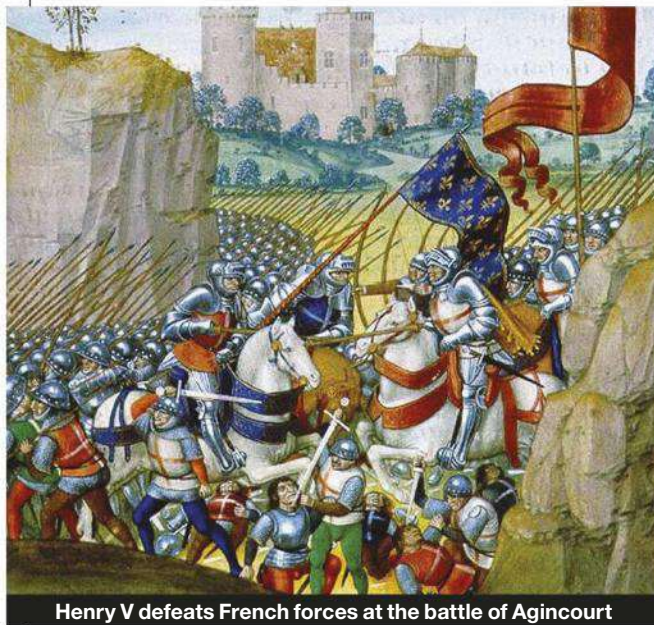
The Westminster Parliament deposes Richard II and proclaims the Duke of Lancaster to be King Henry IV



1400

1400

Owain Glyndŵr is proclaimed **Prince of Wales**, sparking a decade-long uprising against the rule of Henry IV.



Henry V defeats French forces at the battle of Agincourt

1415

The forces of **Henry V triumph at the battle of Agincourt**, in many ways the greatest of all English victories in France. Followed by Henry's conquest of Normandy, this brings the English king to within a whisker of seizing the French throne.

1422

Henry V dies. The throne passes to his infant son, Henry VI, and a group of incompetent or outmanoeuvred guardians. In 1431 **Henry VI** (pictured below) is **crowned in Paris** amid much empty pomp. French recovery had rapidly gathered momentum, earlier led by the heroic visionary Joan of Arc.



GETTY IMAGES/BRIDGEMAN



The army of Mehmed II lays siege to Constantinople

1453

The battle of Castillon in Gascony seals **French victory in the Hundred Years' War**. In France, only Calais remains as an outpost of English rule until that, too, is lost in 1558. In the east, **Constantinople falls to an Ottoman siege**, marking the definitive end of the eastern Roman empire after nearly 1,000 years.

1469

Spain is united through the **marriage of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella of Castile**. By encouraging exploration and conquest in America they and, by marrying into the imperial Hapsburg dynasty, their descendants become the richest and most dynamic force in European politics.

Ferdinand and Isabella, portrayed in a painted wooden altarpiece relief in Granada Cathedral



1450



Rebel leader Jack Cade incites the mob alongside the London Stone, in a later engraving

1450

Malcontents led by Jack Cade camp at Blackheath on the outskirts of London. Though rapidly dispersed, **their rebellion exposes the weakness of Henry VI's administration** and a wider crisis in English government.

1455

At the battle of St Albans, the **first clash of the Wars of the Roses**, an army commanded by Richard, Duke of York defeats Henry VI and his Lancastrian allies. Richard seizes power as protector and from the resulting chaos one of the bloodiest conflicts in English political history evolves. It remains unresolved for decades despite the deposition of Henry VI in 1461 and again a decade later.

1485

Henry Tudor wins victory at the battle of Bosworth to take the English throne. This in theory ends the Wars of the Roses, and marks closure to the period known as the 'Middle Ages'. **II**

Henry VII, whose troops defeated and killed Richard III at the battle of Bosworth



Nicholas Vincent is professor of medieval history at the University of East Anglia

PERSON & LE

✧ **Henry V: The caring king**

Discover the softer side of Agincourt's victor

✧ **Was King John really that bad?**

Judge the evidence for the prosecution

✧ **The Black Prince: hero or villain?**

How depictions of the warrior prince changed through history

✧ **The forgotten king and his Lancelot**

The bond between Henry the Young King and William Marshal

✧ **Isabella of France: rebel queen**

Meet the fiery 'she-wolf' who invaded England

✧ **An A to Z of the Plantagenets**

Explore 26 events, people and places key to the dominant dynasty

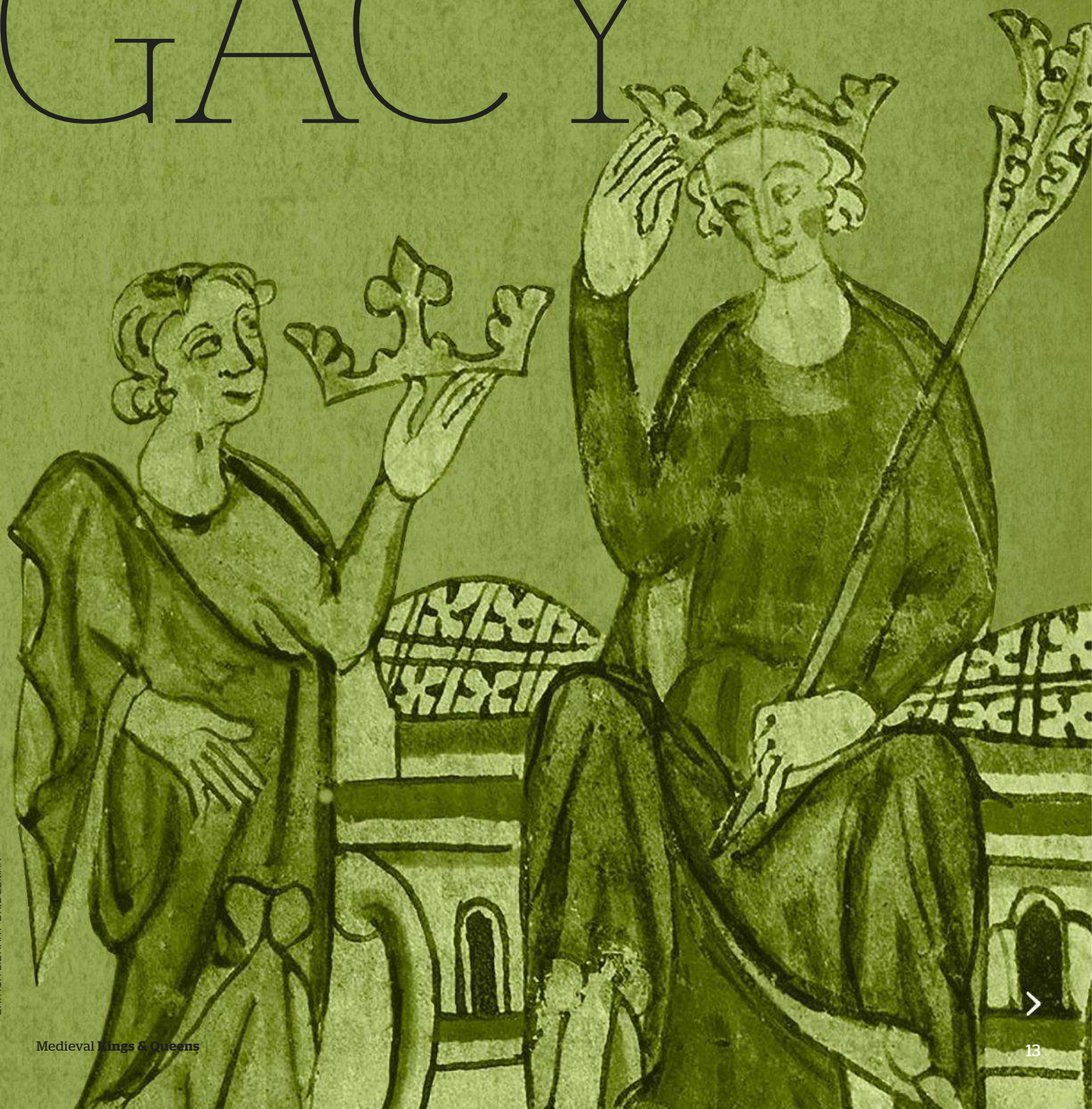
✧ **Edward I**

Was the warlike king a man of principle or a grasping opportunist?

✧ **Eleanor of Aquitaine**

Follow the fortunes of the wife of Henry II and mother of the Lionheart

ALITY GACY



Henry V: *the caring king*

Fretting about the dispossessed and trying to save heretics from the flames aren't acts often associated with one of England's great military heroes. But Henry V did a lot more than put hapless Frenchmen to the sword on the battlefield. As **Malcolm Vale** reveals, the hero of Agincourt was also a sovereign with a softer side

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES BOSWELL

Henry was genuinely worried about the plight of the poor

Henry V was an exceptionally hard-working king. He spent as much, if not more, of his time dealing with the burdensome affairs of church and state as he did on military matters.

Henry's direct intervention in the business of ruling, his speaking voice, and his decisive – often abrupt – manner are spelt out in the surviving documents. Some of these are endorsed with his signature, or 'sign manual', in the form 'RH' (Rex Henricus or Roy Henry).

Around one in 10 of these documents survive today, and some are annotated in the king's own hand. His extraordinary grasp of detail and his concern that a just resolution be reached are striking. Humble men and women, not only the great and good (or not so good), sought his judgment, his pardon and his mercy. Their petitions to him are witness to that.

For example, after receiving a petition from some needy supplicants, in April 1419 he ordered his officers: "To do justice unto them, and especially so that the poorer party shall suffer no

wrong." Similarly, in May 1421, petitioned by a poor woman, he instructed that she should "receive justice the more favourably, considering the poverty of the said Margery".

A particularly striking case was that of Robert Gunthorpe, a London carter, who in February 1419 told the king that he had been in charge of a brewer's dray carrying a consignment of ale for the royal household, which had to be delivered to the Tower of London. But as he got near to the Barbican the cart was overturned and the barrels of ale broken open – the horses had "bolted, because of the great fear they had of the roaring of the king's lions [in the Lion Tower there] and... unless he receives your merciful grace and succour... he will be forced to pay for the said ale... but as he is only a poor labourer, who has to work for his living, he requests pardon for its loss..." Henry granted his petition.

Here, then, was a king who felt what seems to have been a genuine concern for the welfare of his subjects.



He tried to save the lives (and souls) of heretics

“It seemed to him that he was better suited to be a man of the church than a soldier, and that his eldest brother seemed to him to be more suited to being a soldier than the said king...” Remarkable as it may appear today, given the king’s reputation as one of England’s great military heroes, this contemporary description of Henry V wasn’t so far from the truth.

Henry was a vigorous monastic reformer. He created two new monastic foundations during his reign – the Carthusian monastery of Sheen and the Brigittine convent of Syon, both on the Thames – and also attempted a reform of the longer-established religious orders. The black monks – the Benedictines, rich and heavily endowed – should, he thought, be restored to the ascetic and austere religious life advocated by their founder, Saint Benedict. In May 1421, the king assembled 60 English abbots and priors, and more than 300 monks of the order, at Westminster and personally

addressed them on their shortcomings. If the church could not (or would not) set its house in order, he would do it for them.

Henry was a studious, bookish prince, and he listened to the dictates of his conscience. That conscience may not have been unduly disturbed by episodes such as the notorious killing of prisoners at Agincourt, yet this was by no means unprecedented in later medieval warfare.

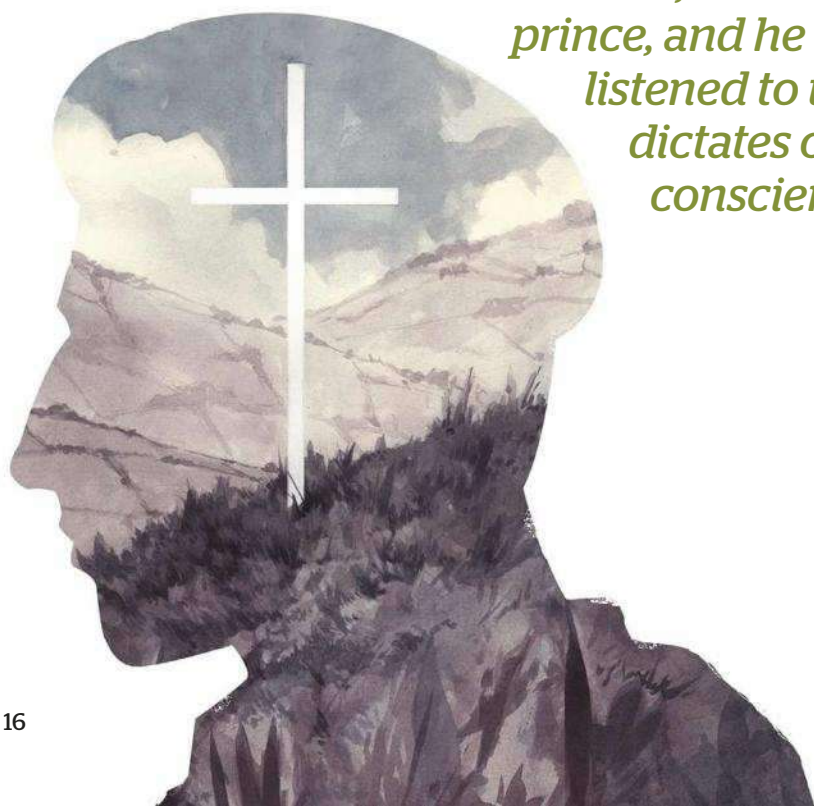
Here was a king who at least tried to practise what he preached. He was not a bigot. He remonstrated with the dissident Sir John Oldcastle, attempting to persuade him of what Henry regarded as the error of his ways. In 1410 Henry, as prince, tried to save the life (and soul) of John Badby as he was being burned as a condemned heretic. And he pardoned large numbers of Sir John’s Lollard followers (religious radicals fiercely critical of the established church) convicted for their parts in the Oldcastle rising of 1414.

Henry was a studious, bookish prince, and he listened to the dictates of his conscience

He played the harp, the flute and the recorder

The hero of Agincourt has traditionally been more associated with trebuchets than treble clefs. But, in reality, Henry V loved music – and he wasn’t content with passively listening to it.

Henry, like the biblical king David, had learned the harp at an early age, and continued to play into later life. We know that a new harp, with a leather case and 12 spare strings, was dispatched across the



channel to him in France, while he was on campaign there in September 1421.

Henry also played the recorder and the flute. And he found time to compose settings of the *Gloria* and *Sanctus* from the Mass. (Musicological opinion once attributed these to Henry IV but is now confident that they were crafted by his son.) This is sophisticated choral polyphony, worthy of the best composers of church music of his time. Its authorship is identified by the words 'Roy Henry' in the British Library's Old Hall manuscript of contemporary musical Mass settings.

Henry's band of secular minstrels went everywhere with him. He even remembered them as he lay dying at the Castle of Vincennes to the east of Paris, when he gave, "by word of mouth", life annuities to 11 of them.

He spoke the people's language

"Trusty and well-beloved, we greet you well." With these opening words of address in some of his letters, Henry V made himself part of a momentous process in the history of our language and our political culture. If we're looking for that rare phenomenon – a permanent legacy left by a medieval ruler – the establishment of English as a language of government, administration, politics and diplomacy was, in large part, the work of Henry V.

Before Henry's reign, England's rulers corresponded with their subjects in Latin and Norman French. Middle English had gained ground as a literary medium in the so-called 'Age of Chaucer' (1350–1400). But it was not until Henry V composed his first letters, instructions and memoranda in English that it began to be used in diplomatic and political circles.

Henry's subjects soon followed his example. In July 1422 the London Brewers' Guild resolved to keep their records not in French, as they had previously, but in English. They were followed by the London Goldsmiths, and other civic bodies – at Bristol (1416) and York (1419) – had already begun to do so.

It's been claimed that the 'triumph of English' was a form of 'redemption' of the language from its subservience to foreign tongues. But there may be another explanation. In May 1420, Henry V's Treaty of Troyes with France upheld the separate existences of the two kingdoms in a future Anglo-French dual monarchy. Both countries were to keep their own laws, customs, governments and, it seems, languages.

In 1417 Henry began to write from France to his English subjects in their vernacular tongue. But his Norman and other French subjects were always addressed in their own vernacular language. The creation of the Anglo-French union enhanced, rather than suppressed, the separate political and linguistic identities of the two peoples.

The English language had little impact outside the British Isles for hundreds of years – it had to wait until the 18th century to be 'discovered' in continental Europe. But Henry V had started an unstoppable movement. To this day, Royal Letters of Assent to Acts of Parliament begin with the words 'Trusty and well-beloved...'

The establishment of English as a language of government and diplomacy was, in large part, the work of Henry V

We know that a new harp, with a leather case and 12 spare strings, was dispatched to him in France



He gave peace a chance

For 600 years, Henry V's legacy has been dominated by his feats on the battlefield. Historian Keith Dockray captured this reputation perfectly when he wrote that Henry was "a warlord... who clearly enjoyed campaigning and felt most at ease in the company of his comrades in arms".

So it may come as a surprise to learn that Henry was a peacemaker who actively sought to reconcile the two warring kingdoms of England and France. Towards the end of his reign he wrote in Anglo-German diplomatic instructions: "What good and profit might arise if there were peace and rest among Christian princes." He was, he said, "now [in December 1421] at the final point and conclusion of his labours and, through God's grace and the help of his allies and friends, shall soon bring this war to an end".

In the event, Henry didn't realise this ambition – his premature death in August 1422 put paid to that. But there's evidence that, during his last two years, he was seeking a resolution of the conflict that had set England and France at odds for a century. Intermediaries, both papal and secular, were acting on his behalf to explore avenues leading towards a peace settlement. We do not know what form that might have taken, whether a long-term partition of the kingdom between the English and French kings might have resulted from it, nor whether a longer-lasting dual monarchy of England and France, as set out in Henry's peace treaty with France at Troyes in May 1420, might have been a viable option.

With hindsight it's easy for us to dismiss such possibilities, supporting the inevitable collapse of any Anglo-French union – but the picture was by no means so clear in 1422. At the time there were

those, even in France, who saw Henry as a potential saviour, rather than destroyer, of the French kingdom. And he stood head and shoulders above contemporaries.

Unlike the insane Charles VI of France, his disinherited, inexperienced and untried son the Dauphin Charles, or the bankrupt and embattled German emperor Sigismund, Henry V was a true king. **H**

Intermediaries, both papal and secular, were acting on his behalf to explore avenues leading towards a peace settlement



Malcolm Vale is emeritus research fellow in modern history at St John's College, Oxford. He specialises in Anglo-French history during the late Middle Ages

DISCOVER MORE

BOOK

► **Henry V: The Conscience of a King** by Malcolm Vale (Yale University Press, 2016)

King John

A reputation reassessed

WAS KING JOHN REALLY THAT BAD?...

Listen to
Marc
Morris
ON THE
PODCAST



Beastly behaviour

King John shows his love for two of his dogs in this illumination from a c14th-century manuscript. Despite this display of affection, one contemporary declared that the king was "brim-full of evil qualities"

Damned by history?
King John on the throne in
a 13th-century illumination.
The contention that his
badness was a later inven-
tion simply doesn't stack up,
argues Marc Morris



...YES!

Most kings were capable of behaving badly from time to time.

Yet, says **Marc Morris**, when it came to lechery, treachery and shocking acts of cruelty, the king who sealed Magna Carta 800 years ago was in a league of his own

For most people (and here I include myself), mention of the name King John conjures up images of the character from the tales of Robin Hood – a pantomime villain, rolling his eyes and gnashing his teeth. At the same time, most people are aware that these tales are legendary and, in their earliest versions, make no mention of John at all. The king was first inserted into the Robin Hood story in the 16th century, but his inclusion has no historical basis whatsoever.

Those who go in search of the real John therefore tend to suppose that he must have been unfairly maligned, and suspect that in reality he was not nearly as bad as legend maintains. In the 20th century, some historians put forward a case for the king's defence, arguing that his badness was largely a later invention, and that his misfortunes as a ruler were mostly down to ill luck. So successful was this rehabilitation that, in the popular imagination, John is now often seen as being the victim of a posthumous smear campaign, a king no worse than most others – misreported and misunderstood.

Among academics this interpretation has not fared nearly so well, for the simple reason that it requires certain fundamental facts about his reign to be downplayed or ignored completely. The reality is that John was not as bad as legend made out – he was worse.

To begin with, John was exceptionally cruel. People generally regard the Middle Ages as a cruel time, and there is indeed some justification for doing so. This was a period when you could be blinded, castrated or even killed by the king's officials for

taking a deer in the royal forest. Anyone who has read their Shakespeare knows that medieval kings and nobles were forever murdering and maiming each other, either on the field of battle or more discreetly in darkened castle chambers.

What was true of the Wars of the Roses, however, was not true of the 12th and 13th centuries, when stricter rules about combat and treatment of prisoners held sway. During these more chivalrous times, aristocrats did not expect to die in battle, and if they were taken prisoner they expected to be kept in honourable captivity until they could be ransomed. Nobles were killed in great numbers in Anglo-Saxon England and again in the later Middle Ages, but between 1076 and 1306 not one English earl was executed.

John repeatedly broke this taboo. Famously, he arranged the 'disappearance' of his nephew and rival, Arthur of Brittany, who contested the king's claim to his inheritance until John captured him in 1202. Arthur's fate was made famous by Shakespeare, who has him threatened with

blinding but killed by accident, falling from his prison window as he tries to escape. During John's reign the finger of suspicion was pointed more firmly at the king himself, with some contemporaries alleging that he murdered his nephew with his own hand. Others argued that John had acted with justification, noting that Arthur was taken while in armed rebellion against his uncle.

Starved to death

But Arthur was only the most famous of John's victims. When the king captured his nephew in 1202, he also took prisoner hundreds of other knights, who expected to be held in honourable confinement. Yet when their friends and families in Anjou and Brittany continued to fight against him, John rounded up 22 of these knightly captives and sent them to Corfe Castle in Dorset, where they were starved to death.

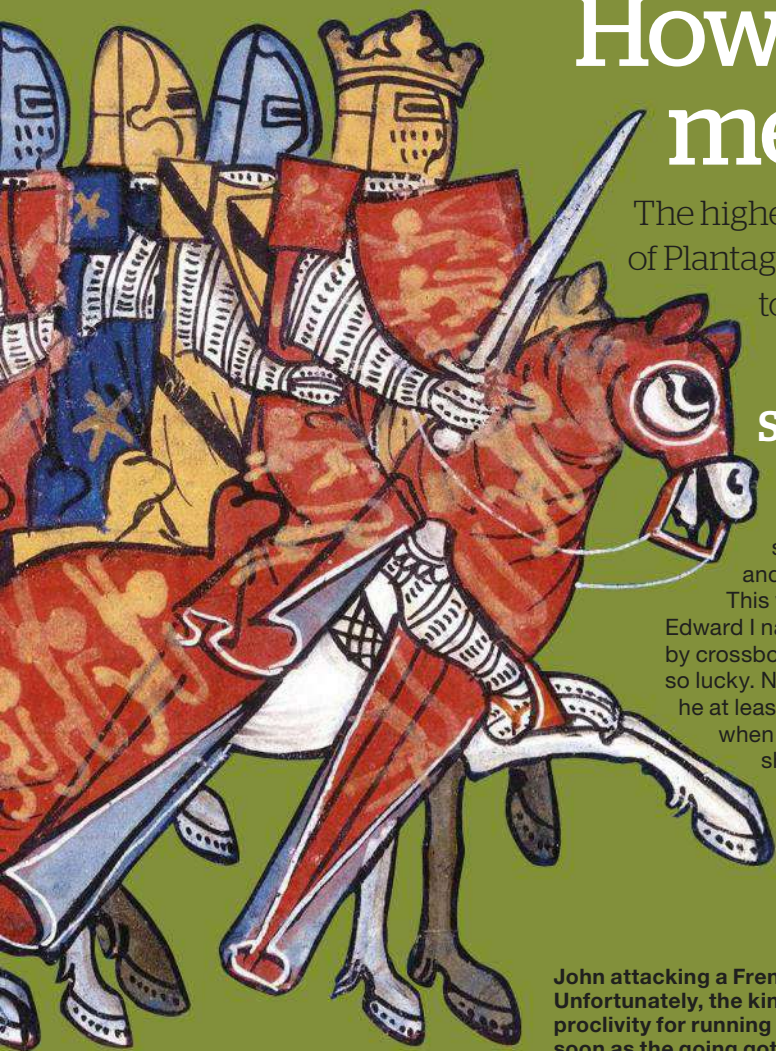
His cruelty was almost unheard of. John's brother Richard the Lionheart had reportedly starved a man to death, but this appears to have been an isolated incident. John, by contrast, killed people in this way en masse, and on more than one occasion. In 1210 he committed one of the most notorious acts of his reign by starving to death the wife and son of his former friend William de Briouze.

This clearly shocked every other noble family in England, but did not deter the king from threatening to mete out similar treatment to others: in 1215 and 1216 he induced some of the Magna Carta rebels to surrender by threatening to starve their captive companions. "He kept his prisoners in such a horrible manner, and in such abject confinement," wrote the author of the 13th-century *History of William Marshal*, "that

John rounded up 22 of these knightly captives and starved them to death at Corfe Castle. Such cruelty was almost unheard of

How to be a good medieval king

The highest standards of conduct were expected of Plantagenet rulers. Sadly, John rarely managed to meet them



Show courage

Medieval kings were expected to be able to protect and defend their subjects from attack, and to lead from the front. This was a risky business. Edward I narrowly escaped death by crossbow bolt; Richard I was not so lucky. Nor was King Harold, but he at least engaged his enemies when they landed on the shores of England and went down fighting alongside his men. John's response in similar circumstances was to run away.

John attacking a French fortress. Unfortunately, the king had a proclivity for running away as soon as the going got tough

Do the lord's work

Medieval kings were expected to be pious, and they could demonstrate this in a variety of ways — by distributing alms to the poor, for example, or building a new church. Some kings were extremely pious in their own devotions, such as the French king Louis IX. King John seems to have been reasonably observant, but his attack on the church led to him being written up as irreligious after his death.



Beaulieu Abbey in Hampshire, founded by King John in 1204

Share your wealth

Those who waited on medieval monarchs did so in the hope of reward, so generous rulers were invariably praised. One of the few positive statements made about King John was that there was always plenty to eat and drink in his hall, and that he distributed robes to his men on a regular basis. When John's son Henry III cut back on such expenditure to save up for his crusade, he was criticised for departing from the example of his father.



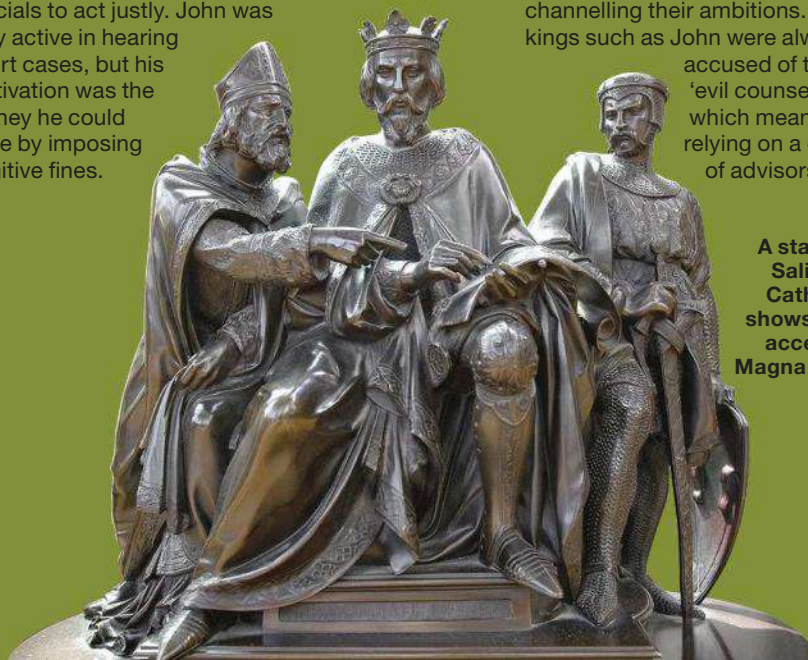
This coin, bearing Henry II's portrait, was minted during John's reign

Act justly

At the time of their coronation, medieval monarchs were required to swear an oath, part of which was a promise to dispense good justice. Good kings took this responsibility very seriously. After his death in 1307 Edward I was praised for the quality of his justice, and in his own letters the same king can be seen exhorting his officials to act justly. John was very active in hearing court cases, but his motivation was the money he could raise by imposing punitive fines.

Be prepared to listen

Maintaining yourself in government involves a simple trick — make sure more people want you to remain in power than want you out. Whether by summoning great councils or later parliaments, successful medieval rulers took steps to consult their more important subjects, noting their views, winning them round and channelling their ambitions. Bad kings such as John were always accused of taking 'evil counsel', which meant relying on a clique of advisors.



A statue at Salisbury Cathedral shows John accepting Magna Carta

it seemed an indignity and a disgrace to all those with him who witnessed such cruelty”.

Another of John's major failings was cowardice. True, he was certainly not a milksop like Henry VI or Richard II, averse to armed conflict. For most of his reign John was at war with the king of France, Philip Augustus, and he did not hesitate to invade Scotland, Wales and Ireland when he felt that the rulers of those lands had crossed him. On several occasions he prosecuted successful sieges. At Rochester in 1215 he famously forced the surrender of the mighty castle by undermining and partially collapsing its great tower.

Fleeing the French

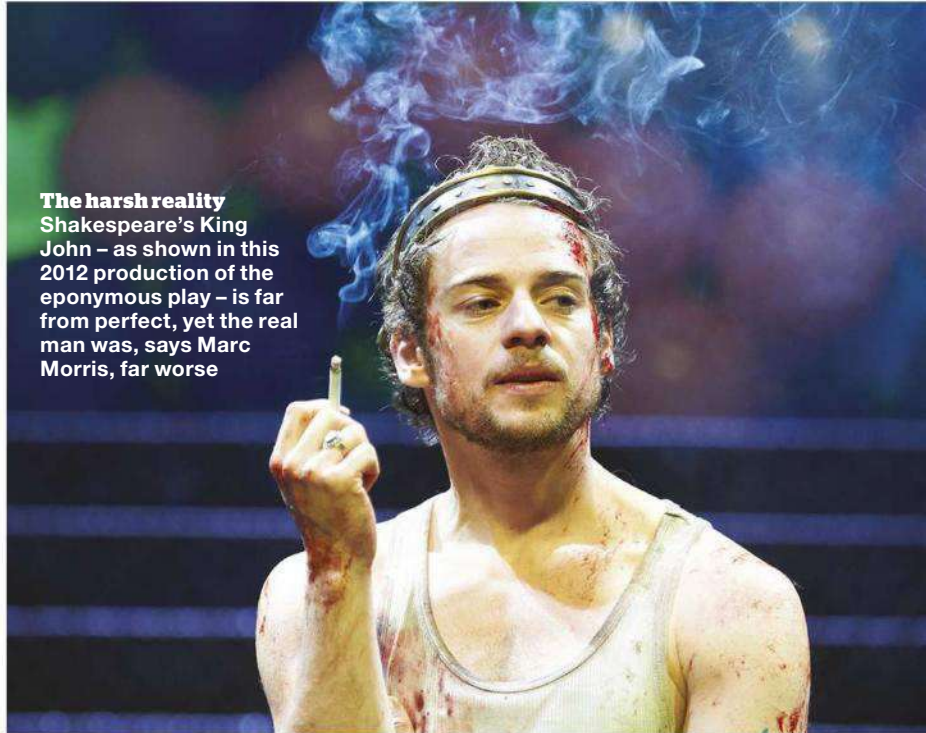
It does not require any particular military genius, however, to carry out a siege, only superior resources in manpower and artillery. The real test for a military commander comes when the odds are less than certain. John was presented with this kind of situation several times, and each time his decision was the same.

When the king of France invaded Normandy in 1203, John failed to confront him and fled to England, an act of desertion that led directly to the duchy's loss. He returned to the continent in 1206 and 1214 to try to regain lost ground, but on each occasion withdrew rapidly when told that his enemies were approaching. When the French finally invaded England in the spring of 1216, John watched them disembark on the beaches of Kent, briefly considered fighting them, then rode off in the opposite direction. So fast was his retreat on this occasion that he was three leagues away before his troops realised he had abandoned them. In an age when personal bravery mattered, John repeatedly showed his back to the enemy. “No man may ever trust him,” sang the troubadour Bertran de Born, “for his heart is soft and cowardly.”

Cruelty and cowardice were two of John's most notable faults, but he had plenty of others besides. Contemporaries also regarded him as treacherous, remembering in particular his attempt to seize the throne for himself while his brother Richard was in captivity. They also complained that he forced himself on the wives and daughters of his barons. On top of all this there was the generally extortionate nature of his regime, with huge taxes and arbitrary fines, resulting in what is reckoned to have been the greatest level of financial exploitation in England since the Norman conquest. Small wonder that when he died in 1216, some chroniclers imagined him suffering the torments of hell.

It is a commonplace defence of John, still advanced in school textbooks, that

The harsh reality
Shakespeare's King John – as shown in this 2012 production of the eponymous play – is far from perfect, yet the real man was, says Marc Morris, far worse



John watched the French disembark, briefly thought about fighting them, then rode off in the opposite direction

contemporary opinion of him is not to be trusted because all chroniclers were churchmen who were biased against the king because he had attacked the church. John certainly persecuted the church with a particular fury after his row with the pope over the appointment of a new archbishop of Canterbury. He drove the monks of Canterbury into exile and eventually seized the lands of all the English clergy – moves that led to England being laid under interdict and the king himself being excommunicated. The clergy certainly had good reason to hate him.

But the assertion that *all* medieval chroniclers were churchmen is a fallacy. Plenty of laymen put pen to parchment during the Middle Ages, and John's reign is no exception. Bertran de Born, the troubadour poet mentioned above, was a member of the lay aristocracy of southern France. The author of *The History of William Marshal* was also a layman, and repeatedly blames the disasters of John's reign on the king's own personality.

Another author, known as the Anonymous of Béthune, is also likely to have been a layman, since his chronicle dwells upon the concerns of a lay audience, and was written for an aristocratic patron, Robert of

Béthune. Robert was a Flemish nobleman who fought on John's side in the final years of his reign, and was well rewarded as a result. Yet even here the overall assessment of the king is damning. “He was a very bad man,” says the Anonymous, “more cruel than all others. He lusted after beautiful women and because of this he shamed the high men of the land, for which reason he was greatly hated. Whenever he could he told lies rather than the truth... He was brim-full of evil qualities.”

Clergymen and laymen alike were united in their detestation of John. Modern attempts to rehabilitate him require us to ignore this chorus of disapproval from his contemporaries as well as his own nefarious acts.

Historians quite rightly set out to challenge legends and dispel myths, but in this case the myth is a modern one. Any reasonable assessment of the sources must lead us to conclude that in the case of Bad King John, tradition had it about right. **H**

Marc Morris is a historian and broadcaster whose books include *A Great and Terrible King: Edward I and the Forging of Britain* (Windmill, 2009)

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BOOK

► **King John: Treachery, Tyranny and the Road to Magna Carta** by Marc Morris (Hutchinson, 2015)

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► Listen to Melvyn Bragg discuss **The Legacy of Magna Carta** on Radio 4 at bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04y6wdt

ON THE PODCAST

You can listen to Marc Morris talking about King John on our weekly podcast at:

► historyextra.com/podcasts

The Black Prince's tomb in Canterbury Cathedral depicts Edward III's son as a resting warrior, a paragon of knightly virtue. The prince conceived the tomb's design himself, but not everyone has bought into his own favourable assessment of his life's achievements





The Black Prince: *hero or villain?*

Edward III's eldest son has been both eulogised as the epitome of medieval chivalry and demonised as the instigator of brutal slaughter. **Barbara Gribling** charts the changing reputation of the victor at Crécy and Poitiers

When compiling lists of English heroes, the Black Prince is not a character who immediately springs to mind.

Both in his time and in later centuries, his character was every bit as controversial as another Plantagenet who forged his reputation on the battlefields of France – King Henry V.

To his contemporaries, the Black Prince was the hero of the battles of Crécy, Poitiers and Nájera, and the villain of the sacking of the city of Limoges. In his lifetime, the eldest son of Edward III garnered a reputation as a chivalric hero. And after his death he became a focal point for debates about heroism and villainy.

At the battle of Crécy in 1346, Edward III placed the 16-year-old Prince Edward in nominal command of part of his army. In the intense fighting, the Black Prince and his men received the brunt of the French attack. Forced to the ground, the prince had to be rescued by his standard-bearer.

Alerted to the dangers faced by his son, Edward III refused to send reinforcements, stating instead: “Let the boy win his spurs.” The prince performed admirably. As a major English victory over the French, Crécy confirmed his future martial promise, reinforced later when the prince became a founder member of the Order of the Garter.

Ten years later, in 1356, this promise was fulfilled when the 26-year-old prince decisively defeated the French army near the city of Poitiers and captured the French king, John II. This English victory significantly undermined the French cause and simultaneously helped to establish the reputations as warriors of Edward and his followers. Contemporaries praised the Black Prince’s chivalrous character – in particular, his modesty, courage and courtesy on the battlefield. According to the medieval chronicler Jean Froissart, after the battle the Black Prince held a banquet in honour of the captured king, and served him dinner. This scene fostered an image of Prince Edward as a humble victor. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Poitiers would be celebrated alongside Agincourt as one of the great English triumphs of the Middle Ages.

So prominent was the Black Prince’s reputation as a warrior that he was asked by King Pedro of Castile to aid him in his fight against his half-brother Henry of Trastámara for the Castilian throne. Prince Edward’s victory at the battle of Nájera on 3 April 1367 sealed his reputation as a successful warrior, though the Spanish

As a major English victory over the French, Crécy confirmed Prince Edward’s **future martial promise**

campaign resulted in debt and illness for the English prince.

In the 14th century, Jean Froissart was seminal in helping to craft the Black Prince’s image, much as Shakespeare would later shape Henry V’s. Froissart’s aim – to record the chivalrous deeds of knights – led him to manufacture and embellish scenes of chivalric virtues. However, Froissart’s description of the Black Prince was not unanimously favourable; in fact, he offered a critique as well.

Even in his lifetime, contemporaries challenged the Black Prince’s heroic image, recasting him as a villain. Criticism focused on his *chevauchée* (raiding expedition) in France in 1355–56, a brutal affair designed to demoralise the enemy. Starting in Bordeaux in September 1355, Edward moved across France, passing Toulouse, Carcassonne and Narbonne. He focused his attention on towns where he could inflict the most damage with the least resistance. His troops looted, burned property and killed inhabitants. On campaign with the Black Prince in 1355, Sir John Wingfield wrote a letter to the bishop of Winchester proclaiming that “there was never such loss nor destruction as hath been in this raid”.

Nomercy

The sack of the city of Limoges in 1370 became a second source of contention. Granted Aquitaine by his father in 1362, the Black Prince ruled a principality that stretched across a third of France. The city under the prince’s rule had surrendered to the French – and for that Edward decided that it must be punished, first laying siege and then sacking it. Froissart reported that: “Men, women and children flung themselves on their knees before the prince, crying: ‘Have mercy on us, gentle sir!’ But he was so inflamed with anger that he would not listen... and all that could be found were put to the sword.”

Froissart records the deaths of more than 3,000 men, women and children, though this figure is not corroborated by local sources. All the same, the sack became notorious for its brutality.





King Edward III and the Black Prince are depicted as "apocalyptic horsemen ravaging France" in the Angers tapestries, commissioned by Louis D'Anjou in 1373



This painting by Benjamin West shows the Black Prince (right, in feathered helmet) meeting his prisoner, King John II of France, following the battle of Poitiers

Edward's reputation in France was a dark one. The Angers tapestries commissioned by Louis D'Anjou (see the picture on the previous pages) illustrate the Black Prince and his father as apocalyptic horsemen ravaging France. Commissioned in 1373 when England's hold on France was waning, they provide a contrast to images presented by the herald of Sir John Chandos, whose poem painted the prince as a hero.

In 1376, the Black Prince died at the age of 45 from a lingering illness. Keenly aware of the power of image, Edward sought to craft his own memory, requesting that his tomb be located in Canterbury Cathedral, depicting him as a resting knight. His sword, shield and armour were arranged above his tomb, providing a lasting tribute to his feats in war. At his death the Black Prince was mourned across Europe, and medieval chroniclers did their bit to polish his reputation, lauding his life's achievements.

However, future debates about what it meant to be a hero had to address the less-palatable aspects of Prince Edward's story. His subsequent reputation, like those of many medieval royals, was shaped in part by Shakespeare, who captured the dual image of the Black Prince as both hero and villain in his plays *Richard II* and *Henry V*. Shakespeare's Black Prince was a consummate warrior who "play'd a tragedy on French soil" as a result of his victories there. This view was upheld in the play *Edward III*, now frequently attributed to Shakespeare.

If the Black Prince's appearances in Shakespeare's plays helped make him a prominent figure in England's medieval story, so did the power of his sobriquet. We know that Prince Edward became the 'Black Prince' during the 16th century, but what we don't know is why the name changed when it did, and why this name came to be used for him. Later historians have speculated that the sobriquet came from the colour of Edward's armour and his dark reputation in France.

French tensions

Interest in the Black Prince as a person in his own right – rather than a character in a play – developed to a greater extent in the 17th century. In 1688, antiquary Joshua Barnes

wrote the first authoritative historical biography of Edward III and the Black Prince, which later authors consulted as a key source. Tensions with France and a royal focus on the Middle Ages led to a renewed desire to reconsider the prince's battles. Barnes pinpointed the prince's military feats as being central to his heroic image.

The British monarchy of the 18th century, however, proved to be the driving force behind the Black Prince's re-emergence as a hero. George III commissioned the American artist Benjamin West to produce a series of grand history paintings in the late 1780s chronicling the deeds of King Edward III and his son for the Windsor Castle audience chamber. Fascinated by the medieval past, George saw the reign of Edward III as a time of royal power. His love of the medieval chimed with his wider programme to reinvent ceremony and splendour for the monarchy.

West reframed Edward's heroism in terms of 18th-century gentlemanly virtues, depicting a chivalric Black Prince who was courageous and honourable. West chose to paint a scene from the aftermath of Crécy, featuring Edward with his father acknowledging the slain John of Bohemia, himself a hero of chivalry. In another painting (above left), West depicted the Black Prince meeting his prisoner, the French king John II, after the battle of Poitiers. His source, David Hume, whose medieval volume of *The History of England* was published in 1761, extolled the prince's heroic character and chose to ignore his battlefield violence. Based on Hume's written depiction, West portrayed Edward as a moderate and sympathetic gentleman conqueror. Not everyone bought into West's rather sanitised and bloodless versions of events, though – his portrayals of Edward's battles were criticised at Royal Academy exhibitions for their lack of realism.

The robust and masculine warrior Edward became a special hero for young soldiers during the Georgian and Regency eras. And the prince was once again celebrated on the stage – William Shirley's drama of 1750, revived in the late Georgian period, offered him as a model of English masculinity for contemporary soldiers.

It wasn't until the 19th century that the Black Prince's hero-villain dynamic really came to the fore. His image circulated in media of all kinds, from children's adventure novels to plays. Fascination with national heroes and the Middle Ages spurred a diversity of Black Princes, and Edward became a focus for debates on character and war.

Children's books tended to emphasise the prince's more attractive qualities in order to

The prince's later reputation was shaped in part by Shakespeare, who captured the **dual image of the Black Prince as both hero and villain**

The Black Prince's controversial life

Edward is born at the Palace of Woodstock in Oxfordshire, the eldest son of King Edward III and Queen Philippa of Hainault

15 June 1330

The Black Prince, in an illustration from William Bruges' 15th-century *Garter Book*

Edward III creates the Order of the Garter to reward knights for exemplary deeds of arms. The Black Prince becomes a founder member

26 August 1346



The 16-year-old Black Prince (left, in red) fights the French at the battle of Crécy

The recently knighted prince fights at the battle of Crécy in an army commanded by his father. The English inflict a crushing defeat on the French

1348

Edward launches a series of *chevauchées* (raids) in France to undermine French supremacy on the continent. These soon became notorious for their destruction and violence

1355–56

On 19 September, Edward and his troops defeat the French near Poitiers and capture King John II in a significant victory for the English

1356

Edward marries Joan of Kent in a love match

A carved boss in Canterbury Cathedral depicting Joan of Kent



1361

The Black Prince's sacking of the city of Limoges in central France becomes infamous for its violence and brutality

1362

Edward the Black Prince rules Aquitaine from 1362, creating a lavish court in Bordeaux

1367

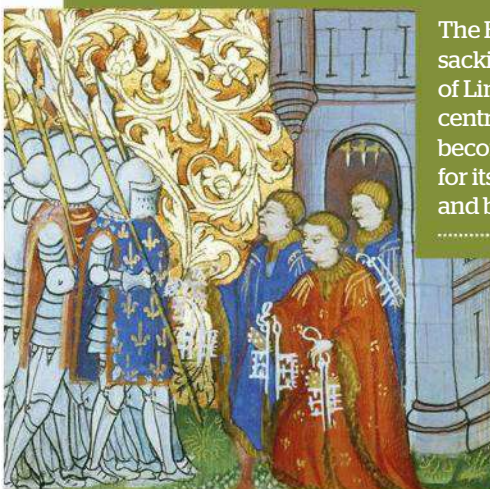
Edward aids King Pedro of Castile in the Battle of Nájera, successfully restoring Pedro to the throne

1370

The prince dies on Trinity Sunday after a long illness. He is buried in Canterbury Cathedral in a tomb he helped to fashion

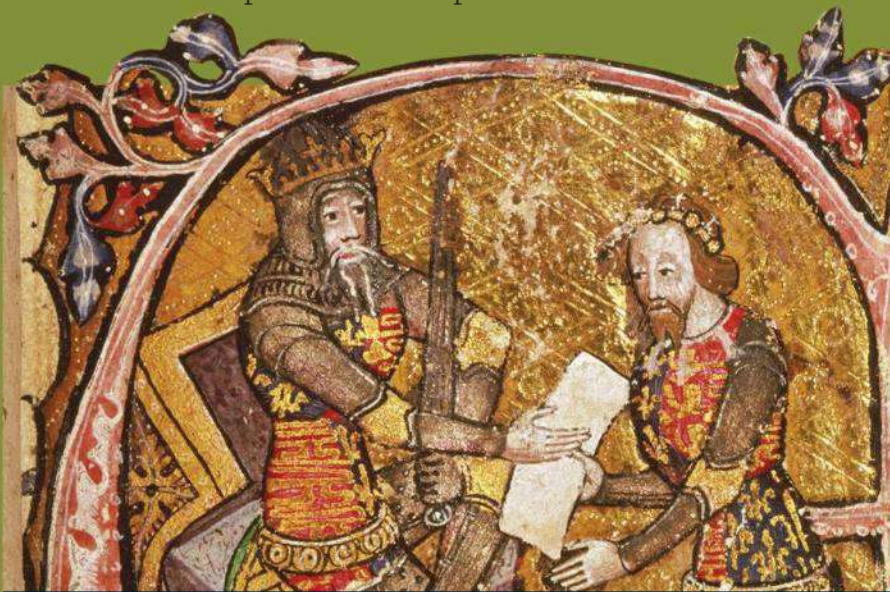
8 June 1376

The city of Limoges submits to John, Duke of Berry in 1370, triggering the Black Prince's terrible retribution



Five medieval war heroes

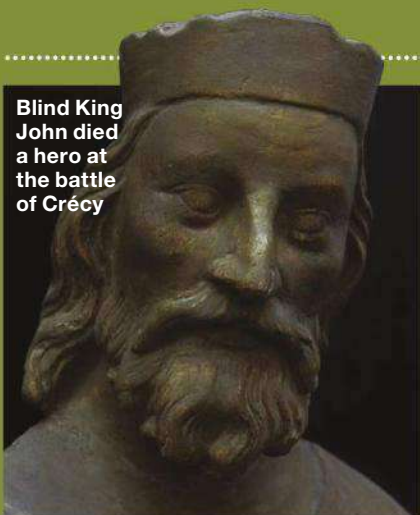
How did their reputations compare with the Black Prince's?



Edward III (left) with the Black Prince, 1362

King Edward III

Founder of the Order of the Garter and war hero of the 14th century, Edward III ruled England for 50 years. His reputation during his lifetime as an ideal statesman and chivalric hero continued into the 18th century. Victorian criticism of the Hundred Years' War led to the king being recast as a warmonger.



Blind King John died a hero at the battle of Crécy

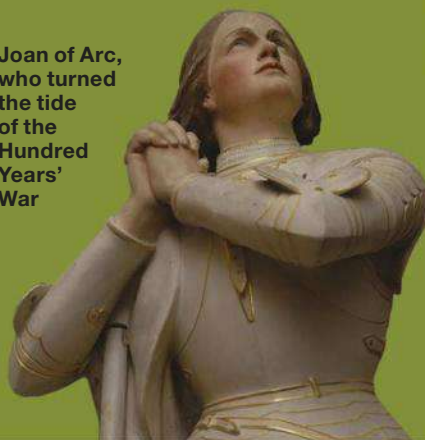
King John of Bohemia

John fought with the French at Crécy in 1346. The quintessential brave knight, John was blind but had his knights tie their horses to his as he went into battle. Killed alongside his men, his feats were celebrated both in the 14th century and after. According to legend, the Black Prince took John's feathers, which became the symbol of later princes of Wales.

Joan of Arc

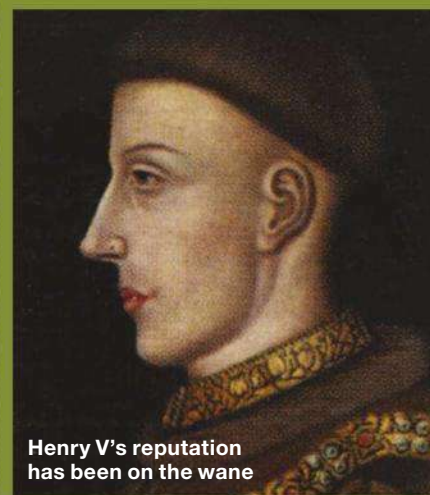
Born a peasant, Joan became a heroine in France, leading troops to victory against the English at the siege of Orléans in 1429. Her leadership turned the tide of the Hundred Years' War. Captured by the Burgundians in 1430, she was sold to the English, charged with heresy and burned at the stake, later being absolved by the pope after her death. The Victorians recast Joan as a martyr and war hero.

Joan of Arc, who turned the tide of the Hundred Years' War



King Henry V

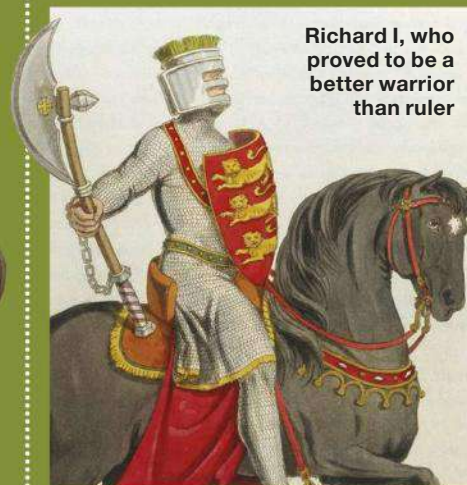
Hero of Agincourt, Henry V's reputation was crafted by Shakespeare, who presented the king as a consummate warrior. His image has undergone re-evaluation in the 21st century, focusing less on the 'hero' of Agincourt, and more on his cruelty and coldness.



Henry V's reputation has been on the wane

King Richard I

An archetypal warrior, Richard Coeur de Lion was known for his battles in the Holy Land during the Third Crusade. He spent less than a year of his reign in England and died on campaign in France. Praised for his skill as a warrior, the Victorians questioned his capability as a ruler.



Richard I, who proved to be a better warrior than ruler



An illustration from Jean Froissart's *Chronicles* shows the battle of Nájera in 1367. It was in this clash between Anglo-Gascon and Franco-Castilian forces, in what is now northern Spain, that the Black Prince sealed his reputation as an accomplished warrior

teach young children proper behaviour. One of the most popular textbooks of the 19th century, *Little Arthur's History of England* (1835), added to Edward's repertoire of virtues by referring to him as "the bravest and politest prince at that time in the world".

National heroes

Yet Edward served as a villain as well. His sack of Limoges was used as a lesson about barbarous behaviour – one that the Victorians believed they had safely moved beyond. Children's author Meredith Jones wrote that at Limoges Edward was a frightening figure with "angry flashing eyes", violent and ruthless.

Jones wasn't the only Victorian to regard Limoges as a blot on Edward's otherwise good character. In a public lecture on the prince's life in 1852, the canon of Canterbury, Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, placed Edward's brutality in the city within a wider criticism of chivalry, suggesting that it amounted to class violence against the poor. Though Stanley stated that the Black Prince was a model knight, he questioned whether Edward could indeed be an appropriate role model for modern men and boys. He concluded that the prince's successes were greater than his failures.

Many early 20th-century portrayals of Edward were less ambiguous about his legacy. One such was the statue of the Black Prince in Leeds City Square, commissioned by the city's ex-lord mayor, Colonel T Walter Harding. Harding entertained the possibility of other heroes – Queen Elizabeth I, Simon De Montfort and Henry V – but settled on Edward because he regarded

the prince as a champion of the people and a patriotic warrior – values he wished to instil in the citizens of Leeds.

Published in 1917, Henry Newbolt's *Book of the Happy Warrior* also placed the Black Prince within a tradition of warrior heroes who happily fought for their nation. The 1929 historical novel *The English Paragon* by Marjorie Bowen (a pseudonym) continued to define Prince Edward as a model of chivalry. Restoration work on the prince's tomb at Canterbury in the 1930s led to some re-evaluation of his character but, by then, such debates about his memory lacked the lustre of Victorian discussions.

By the 1950s, Edward as a popular icon was disappearing from public view. Despite his fading profile, guidebooks to Canterbury Cathedral kept his memory alive, while in the 1955 film *The Dark Avenger* Errol Flynn played the Black Prince as a medieval cowboy saving the peasants and his lady from cruel French nobles.

Scholarly interest in the Black Prince has remained stronger, with the publication of a number of papers and books about the prince's life and career in 1976 by John Harvey, Barbara Emerson and Richard Barber in response to the 600th anniversary

of Edward's death. More recently, in 2007 David Green offered a re-evaluation of Edward, highlighting the need to understand the prince within the context of the 14th century.

Despite this, the Black Prince's apotheosis as a prominent figure in the public consciousness undoubtedly occurred during the 18th and 19th centuries when both royals and populace celebrated him. Debates about the nature of heroism and villainy, royalty, chivalry, war and character helped to market Edward's image.

These debates no longer have the same currency, and for many, Edward is an obscure figure. In today's more cosmopolitan society, the Black Prince's story lacks cultural resonance.

However, exploring the Georgian and Victorians' fascination with Edward allows us to evaluate changing values and ideas about the hero in history. Perhaps now, it is time to revisit the Black Prince's character once more. **H**

Barbara Gribling is honorary fellow in modern British history at Durham University. Her book *The Image of the Black Prince in Georgian and Victorian England: Negotiating the Late Medieval Past* will be published by The Royal Historical Society in June 2017

DISCOVER MORE

BOOK

- ▶ **Edward the Black Prince** by David Green (Longman, 2007)
- ▶ **Edward III** by W Mark Ormrod (Yale, 2013)
- ▶ **Chronicles** by Jean Froissart (Penguin, 1978)

In today's more cosmopolitan society, the Black Prince's story lacks cultural resonance



Was the story of Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere inspired by a real relationship? **Thomas Asbridge** explores a friendship between king and knight that echoed England's greatest legend

The legends of King Arthur, his leading warrior – the mighty Lancelot – and the tragic love triangle they formed with Queen Guinevere retain their allure, though more than eight centuries have passed since they were first popularised. These tales remain touchstones of the Middle Ages, evoking romanticised images of a distant era, replete with knightly daring and courtly gallantry. Yet, for all our fascination with Arthurian myths, one probable inspiration for these stories has been all but forgotten.

In the late 12th century – just as medieval Europe was falling under the spell of early Arthurian ‘romance’ literature – a real king was feted as the ultimate paragon of chivalry. He, too, was served by a faithful retainer, one renowned as the greatest knight of his generation. And, like Arthur and Lancelot, their story ended in tragedy amid accusations of adultery and betrayal.

Though history seldom remembers him now, Henry the Young King seemed assured of a glittering future when he was crowned king of England in Westminster Abbey on 14 June 1170. Just 15 years old, Henry was already tall and incredibly handsome – the golden child of his generation. As the eldest surviving son of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine, he stood to inherit medieval Europe’s most powerful realm, the Angevin empire, with lands stretching from the borders of Scotland in the north to the foothills of the Pyrenees in the south.

But though Young Henry had undergone the sacred and transformative ritual of coronation – becoming a king in name – he was denied real power for the remainder of his career. Crowned during the lifetime of his virile and overbearing father (in the vain hope of securing a peaceful succession), the Young King was expected to wait patiently in the wings, serving as an associate monarch.

Vexed king

As it was, Henry II (or the ‘Old King’, as he came to be known) lived for another 19 years, stubbornly refusing to apportion any region of the Angevin realm to his primary heir. Not surprisingly, Young Henry soon became vexed by this state of affairs.

The situation would have unsettled any ruling dynasty but, because Young Henry happened to belong to the most dysfunctional royal family in English history, it proved to be utterly ruinous. Thwarted by an imperious father on the one hand, yet encouraged to assert his rights by a scheming mother on the other, the Young King also had to contest with a viper’s brood of



Lancelot fights for Guinevere in a medieval illumination. Was William Marshal also ensnared in a dangerous love triangle?

Marshal shot to fame in the tournaments, using a combination of martial skill, steely resolve and canny tactics

power-hungry siblings, including Richard the Lionheart and the future King John. In many respects Young Henry’s career proved to be a tragic waste. He led two failed rebellions against his father and ultimately suffered a squalid and agonising death in 1183, having contracted dysentery.

Historians have traditionally offered a withering assessment of his career, typically portraying him as a feckless dandy – the young, extravagant playboy who, once denied the chance to rule in his own right, frittered away his time in pursuit of vacuous chivalric glory. Dismissed as “shallow, vain, careless, empty-headed, incompetent, improvident and irresponsible”, the Young King remains a misunderstood and often overlooked figure.

A closer and more impartial study of Henry’s life reveals that this view is overly simplistic, at times even misrepresentative, and deeply shaded by hindsight. In fact, the best contemporary evidence indicates that the Young King was an able and politically engaged member of the Angevin dynasty, renowned in his own lifetime as a champion of the warrior class. This status brought Henry real political influence and marked him out as a model for contemporary authors of chivalric literature and Arthurian myth.

The course of Young Henry’s career and his connection to the cult of chivalry were heavily influenced by his close association with William Marshal – a man later

described by the archbishop of Canterbury as “the greatest knight in all the world”. Born the younger son of a minor Anglo-Norman noble, William trained as a warrior and rose through the ranks, serving at the right hand of five English monarchs in the course of his long and eventful career.

Like Henry, Marshal was said to have been a fine figure of a man, but he was built first and foremost for war. Possessed with extraordinary physical endurance and vitality, and imbued with the raw strength to deliver shattering sword blows that resounded like a blacksmith’s hammer, he also became a peerless horseman, able to manoeuvre his mount with deft agility. These gifts, when married to an insatiable appetite for advancement, fuelled William’s meteoric rise. Later in life he would become Earl of Pembroke and regent of the realm. But in 1170 Marshal was still in his early twenties and a household knight serving in the retinue of Eleanor of Aquitaine.

After Henry the Young King’s coronation, Marshal was appointed as the boy’s tutor-in-arms – a promotion that was probably engineered by Queen Eleanor so that she could maintain a degree of contact with, and influence over, her eldest son. William soon became Young Henry’s leading retainer and close confidant. The pair developed a warm friendship and together they set out in the 1170s to make their mark on the world.

War games

By that time, western Europe was in the grip of a craze for knightly tournaments. These contests were light years away from the mannered jousts of the later Middle Ages, being riotous, chaotic affairs, tantamount to large-scale war games played out by teams of mounted knights across great swathes of territory often over 30 miles wide.

They were not without their risks. There is no evidence that warriors used blunted weaponry – relying instead upon their armour to protect them from severe injury – but the gravest danger came from being unhorsed and trampled under-hoof in the midst of a heated melee. Henry’s younger brother Geoffrey died from wounds sustained in this manner, and one of William Marshal’s sons later suffered a similar fate. But the great value of these events was that they offered noblemen the perfect opportunity to demonstrate their knightly qualities to their peers, enabling them to earn renown within a society obsessed with chivalric culture. Tournaments came to feature heavily in Arthurian romances, with Lancelot depicted as the leading champion

The most persistent accusation levelled by historians against the Young King and his

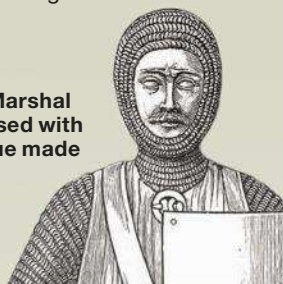
The lives of the “great knight” and England’s heir

William Marshal

1147

Born the younger son of a minor Anglo-Norman noble, John Marshal, William grows up in south-west England

William Marshal was blessed with a physique made for war



1170

William is appointed tutor-in-arms to Henry the Young King



A medieval woodcut shows men jousting, a highly perilous pastime at which William Marshal excelled

1179

William is permitted to raise his own banner and attends the great tournament at Lagny-sur-Marne

1182

Accused of betraying Henry and bedding his wife, William is forced into exile

1183

William returns to Young Henry’s side shortly before his death, and later sets out for the Holy Land to redeem Henry’s crusading vow

1186

Returning to Europe, William enters King Henry II’s household and starts to accrue lands and wealth

Henry the Young King

1155

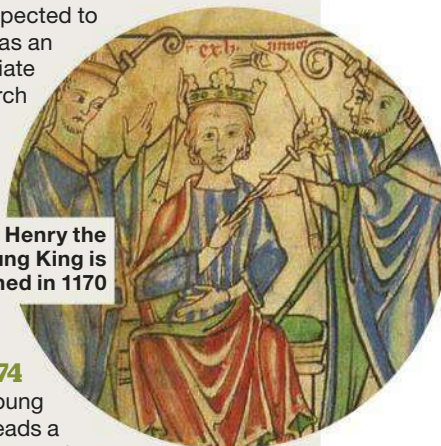
Henry is born to King Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. As their eldest surviving son he is heir-apparent to the Angevin empire. His younger brother is Richard the Lionheart

1160

Though barely five, Henry is married to the French king’s two-year-old daughter, Marguerite; both were rumoured to have bawled throughout the ceremony

1170

Young Henry is crowned king of England in Westminster Abbey during his father’s lifetime, but expected to serve as an associate monarch



Henry the Young King is crowned in 1170

1173-74

The Young King leads a rebellion against Henry II, in alliance with Louis VII of France and Philip of Flanders, but is thwarted by his father

1176

Henry starts to frequent the northern French tournament circuit alongside William Marshal, earning a reputation for lavish largesse

1179

Henry attends the coronation of Philip II of France and the grand tournament at Lagny-sur-Marne

1183

A second rebellion against Henry II’s regime leads to war in Aquitaine. Henry the Young King contracts dysentery and dies in agony at Martel, west central France

knight William Marshal is that they wastefully immersed themselves in the world of the chivalric tournament. However, though it is true that they became leading devotees of the tourney circuit, this was hardly the all-consuming focus of their careers; their participation was chiefly confined to an intense four-year period between 1176 and 1180. Nor is it the case that those years were squandered. In fact, the successes they enjoyed on the tournament field transformed the prospects of both men.

Serving as the captain of Young Henry’s tournament team, William Marshal shot to fame using a combination of martial skill, steely resolve and canny tactics to score a tide of victories. William was rightly revered for his prowess, but there were also important practical and financial gains to be made. Most tournaments revolved around attempts to capture opposing knights, either by battering them into submission or by seizing control of their horses (one of William’s favourite tricks). Prisoners would then have to pay a ransom, and perhaps also forfeit their equipment, in return for release. Marshal bested some 500 warriors in those years and thus accrued a significant personal fortune. By 1180 he was in a position to support a small retinue of knights of his own and had achieved such celebrity that he was on familiar terms with counts, dukes and kings.

Exalted standing

Henry the Young King also stood to gain from his involvement in the tournament circuit. As the patron of a leading team Henry participated in events but was generally shielded from the worst of the fracas by his retainers. For a man of his exalted social standing there was less emphasis on individual prowess and more upon the chivalric quality of largesse – and in this regard Henry was unmatched. At a time when leading nobles were judged on the size and splendour of their retinues, the Young King assembled one of the most impressive military households in all of Europe.

As a result, contemporaries compared Henry to Alexander the Great and Arthur, the great heroes of old, and hailed him as a “father of chivalry” – a cult figure, worthy of reverence. Such ostentation came at a crippling cost – but this display of status was not simply an exercise in idle frivolity, as most historians have assumed.

Tourneys were games of prowess, but they were played by many of the most powerful men in Europe – barons and magnates driven by a deepening fixation with knightly ideals. This lent Young Henry’s renown a



Young Henry and William revelled in a glorious festival of pageantry, awash with the colours of hundreds of unfurled banners

potent edge because it inevitably brought with it a measure of influence beyond the confines of the tournament field. As a teenager, Henry had sought power through rebellion. In the late 1170s he made his name and affirmed his regal status in a different arena. These achievements could not be ignored by the Old King. Historians have often suggested that Henry II viewed his son's lavish tournament career as merely wasteful and trivial. But by 1179 his attitude was unquestionably more positive.

On 1 November that year in the royal city of Rheims, the frail teenager Philip II was crowned and anointed as the next king of France. All of western Europe's leading dynasties and noble houses attended this grand ceremony, and to top it all a massive tournament was organised to celebrate Philip's investiture. That autumn the close correlation between practical power and chivalric spectacle was laid bare.

With the creation of a new French king, the chess board of politics was about to be reordered – and naturally all of the key players were angling for influence and advantage. Leading figures such as Philip, Count of Flanders and Duke Hugh of Burgundy – both tournament enthusiasts – were present, each eager to establish himself as the young French monarch's preferred mentor. Henry II looked to his eldest son to represent the Angevin house, so Young Henry went to Rheims alongside his illustrious champion, William Marshal.

Young Henry duly played a starring role in the coronation, carrying Philip's crown in affirmation of his close connection to the new French monarch. After a round of feasting, Henry and William moved on to a large area of open terrain at Lagny-sur-Marne east of Paris for the greatest tournament of the 12th century. There, as leading knights among some 3,000 participants, Young Henry and William revelled in a glorious festival of pageantry, awash with the colours of hundreds of unfurled banners. That day, according to one chronicler, "the entire field of combat was swarming with [warriors]", so that "not an inch of ground could be seen". It was a spectacle the likes of which had "never

[been] seen before or since" – and Young Henry and William Marshal were its stars.

The contest at Lagny marked the apogee of William Marshal's tournament career and the Young King's dedication to the cult of chivalry. Having resuscitated his reputation, Young Henry sought to make a more direct re-entry into the world of power politics by snatching the duchy of Aquitaine from his brother Richard the Lionheart. But then a shocking rumour reached his ears.

One of his warriors was bedding Queen Marguerite, his wife – and the man accused of this heinous crime was none other than William Marshal.

Passionate affair

It is impossible to know whether there was any substance to this allegation. It appears to have been levelled by a disaffected faction in the Young King's entourage, possibly prompted by jealousy of Marshal's glittering career. It is perhaps no coincidence that it was during this period that the famed author of Arthurian literature, Chrétien de Troyes, composed his first story about Lancelot and his passionate affair with Queen Guinevere.

In all probability Young Henry did not believe William to be guilty or he would have enacted a more severe punishment than mere exile. As it was, the shame surrounding Marshal was sufficient to require his banishment from court in late 1182. When the Young King began his second rebellion against his father in 1183 he did so without his leading knight and advisor by his side – and the subsequent civil war did not go in his favour. Facing the combined might of the Old King and the Lionheart, Young Henry eventually relented and recalled William to his side.

Tragically, William Marshal arrived too late to do more than merely witness his lord's decline into ill health: the Young King contracted dysentery and died in agony at Martel, near Limoges in France, on 11 June 1183. On his deathbed Henry reportedly turned to "his most intimate friend" and bid William to carry his regal cloak to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in payment of his "debts to God". It was a charge that William duly fulfilled.

Young King Henry received scourging press from most late 12th-century chroniclers. For those historians, writing during the reigns of the Old King and his successors, Henry was easy game – a wayward princeling who died young and left no great court historians to sing his praises. In their accounts he became little more than a mutinous traitor who "befouled the whole world with his treasons".

Only a few of Young Henry's closest



William Marshal continued

1189

Marriage to the heiress Isabel of Clare (arranged by Richard the Lionheart) brings William the lordship of Striguil (Chepstow). The couple have no fewer than 10 children

1190-94

William serves as co-justiciar of England during King Richard's absence (on crusade and in captivity)

1215

William helps to negotiate the terms of Magna Carta. He appears as the first named nobleman in the document

1216

After King John's death, William supports the child Henry III's claim to the crown and is appointed 'guardian of the realm', thus becoming regent of England

1217

Despite being 70 years old, William fights in the front line at the battle of Lincoln and defeats the combined forces of the baronial rebels and the French



1219

William resigns as regent, dies in peace shortly thereafter and is buried in London's Temple Church

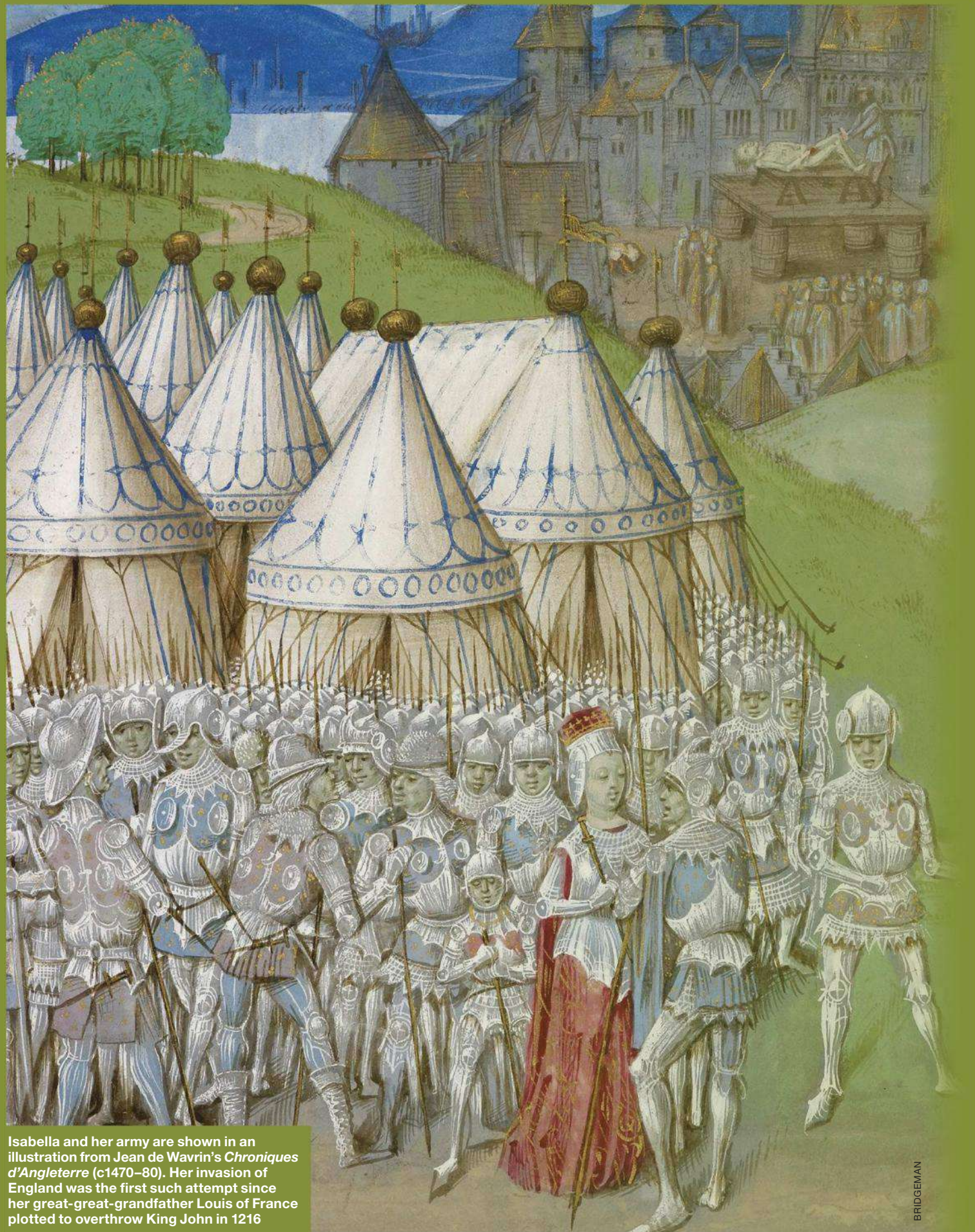
contemporaries offered a more immediate impression of his achievements and character. The most heartfelt memorial was offered by his own chaplain, who wrote that "it was a blow to all chivalry when he passed away in the very glow of youth" and concluded that "when Henry died heaven was hungry, so all the world went begging." **II**

Thomas Asbridge is reader in medieval history at Queen Mary, University of London. In 2014 he presented the BBC Two documentary *The Greatest Knight: William the Marshal*

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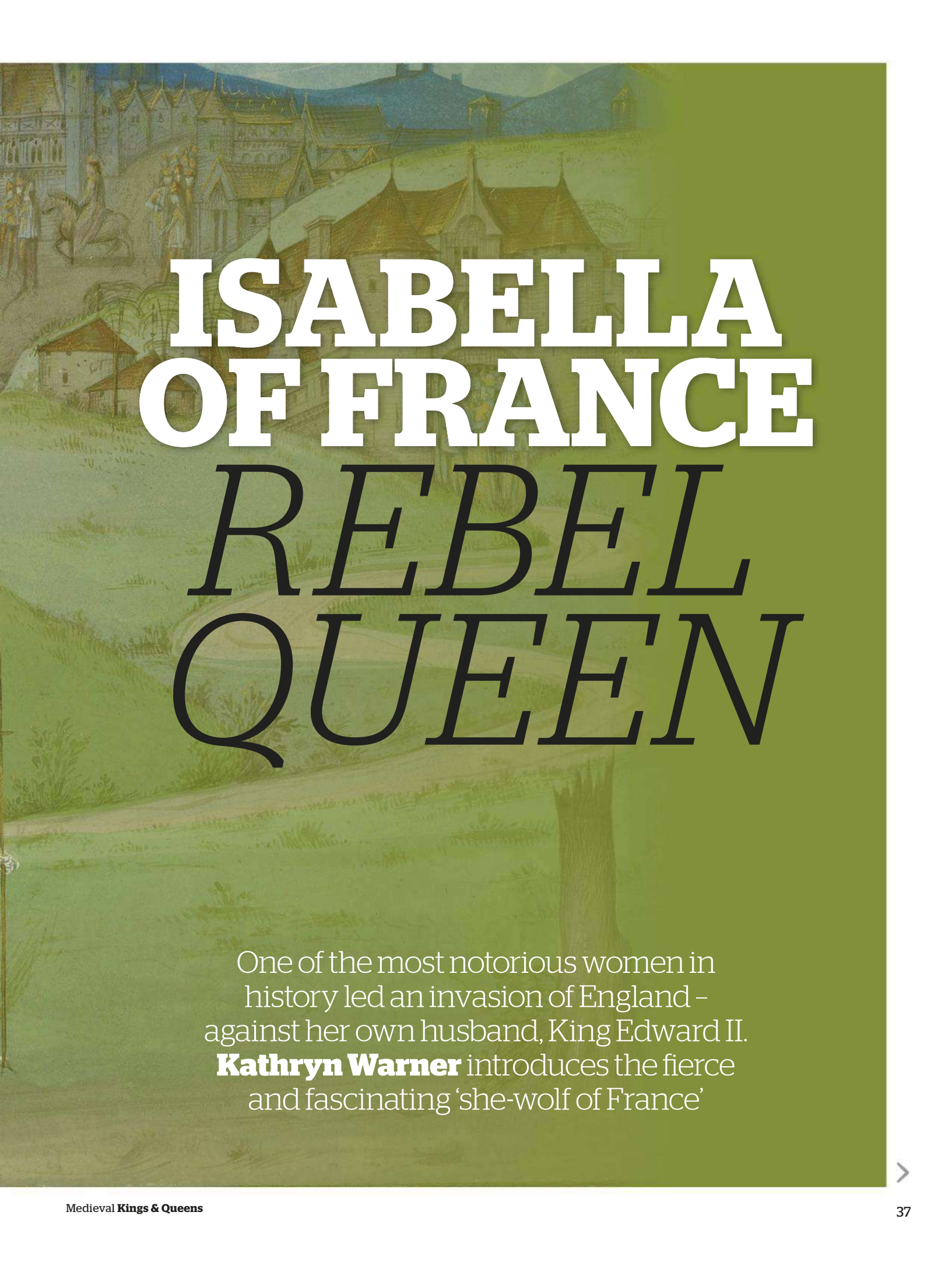
BOOKS

► **The Greatest Knight: The Remarkable Life of William Marshal, the Power Behind Five English Thrones** by Thomas Asbridge (Simon & Schuster, 2015)



Isabella and her army are shown in an illustration from Jean de Wavrin's *Chroniques d'Angleterre* (c1470–80). Her invasion of England was the first such attempt since her great-great-grandfather Louis of France plotted to overthrow King John in 1216

BRIDGEMAN

A medieval manuscript illustration serves as the background for the title. It depicts a large, multi-towered castle with a blue roof on a hill. In the foreground, a queen in a blue and gold gown sits on a white horse, facing left. Other figures in period dress are visible near the castle. The entire scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter.

ISABELLA OF FRANCE *REBEL QUEEN*

One of the most notorious women in history led an invasion of England – against her own husband, King Edward II. **Kathryn Warner** introduces the fierce and fascinating ‘she-wolf of France’

When a woman is dubbed a 'she-wolf', it carries certain connotations. And Isabella of France, who led an invasion of England that ultimately resulted in the deposition of her husband Edward II in January 1327 – the first ever abdication of a king in England – is one woman whose reputation has attracted plenty of negative press. Yet though the 'she-wolf of France' continues to polarise opinion, in part that's because of the many myths that surround her.

Isabella was born in 1295, the sixth of the seven children of King Philip IV of France (commonly known to history as Philippe le Bel – the Fair) and Joan I, queen of the small kingdom of Navarre. Isabella was just 12 years old when she was married to Edward II in Boulogne, northern France, on 25 January 1308; her husband was 23.

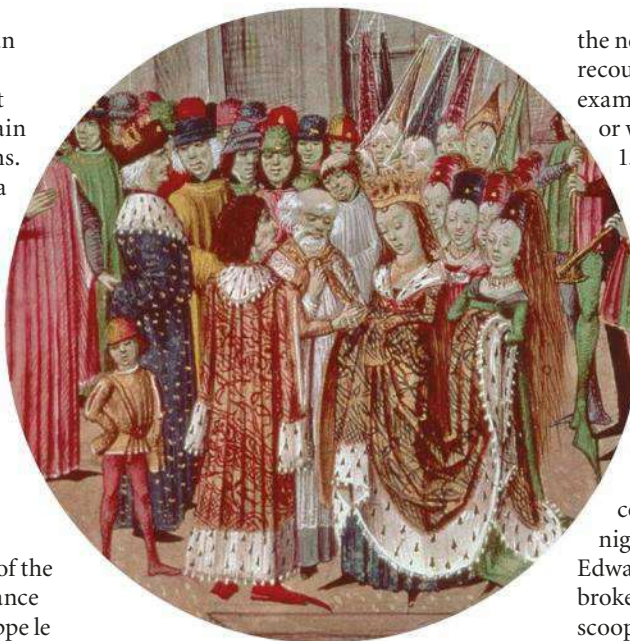
Her three older brothers Louis X, Philip V and Charles IV, the third of whom died in 1328, all reigned as kings of France and Navarre – the last kings of the Capetian dynasty that had ruled France since 987. As all of them left daughters but no surviving sons, they were succeeded by their cousin Philip VI, first of the Valois kings who ruled France until 1589.

Isabella's son Edward III of England claimed the throne of France in the 1330s as the only surviving grandson of Philip IV, and began what (much later) became known as the Hundred Years' War. Before then, though, Isabella herself was both a pawn and a player in the games of European power.

Love rivals

Isabella arrived in England for the first time on 7 February 1308. She never met her husband's father, Edward I ('Longshanks'), who had died on 7 July 1307, and she certainly never met William Wallace (as depicted in *Braveheart*), who had been executed on 23 August 1305.

She and Edward II were jointly crowned king and queen of England at Westminster Abbey on 25 February 1308, exactly a month after their wedding. Isabella was too young to play any role in English politics for several years, and too young to be Edward's wife in more than name only. In any case, he had been infatuated since the early 1300s with Piers Gaveston, a young nobleman of Béarn in southern France, whom he made Earl of Cornwall and married to his royal niece Margaret de Clare in 1307.



Isabella and Edward II's wedding at Boulogne in 1308, depicted in another image from the *Chroniques d'Angleterre*. She was just 12 years old

When Edward went to war against her brother, Isabella was treated as an enemy. **She was not the kind of person to tolerate such disrespect**

Gaveston was assassinated in June 1312 by a group of English barons unhappy with his excessive influence over the king. The barons were led by the wealthy and powerful Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, the king's first cousin and Isabella's uncle. (The king finally gained his revenge on Lancaster in March 1322 when he had him beheaded for treason.)

By the time of Gaveston's murder Queen Isabella was 16 or 17 and pregnant with her first child – a son, born at Windsor Castle on Monday 13 November 1312, who later succeeded his father as King Edward III. Over the following nine years she bore another son and two daughters to Edward.

Isabella and Edward II seemingly had a successful, mutually affectionate marriage until the early 1320s. Certainly it was not, as it is sometimes portrayed, an unhappy, tragic disaster from start to finish. Most of

the negative stories about the couple recounted in modern literature – for example, that Edward gave Isabella's jewels or wedding gifts to Piers Gaveston in 1308, that in 1312 he abandoned her, weeping and pregnant, to try to save Gaveston, or that he cruelly removed her children from her custody in 1324 – are much later fabrications. An eyewitness to the royal couple's extended visit to Isabella's homeland from May to July 1313 stated that Edward loved Isabella, and that the reason for his arriving late for a meeting with Isabella's father Philip IV was because the royal couple had overslept after their night-time "dalliances". During this trip Edward saved Isabella's life when a fire broke out in their pavilion one night, scooping her up and rushing outside with her while they were both still naked.

Enemy alien

Unfortunately, Edward II's excessive partiality towards his last and most powerful 'favourite' – Hugh Despenser the Younger, an English nobleman who had married one of Edward's nieces in 1306 and who was appointed the king's chamberlain in 1318 – was to cause an irrevocable breakdown in Isabella and Edward's marriage in and after 1322.

Isabella had tolerated her husband's previous male favourites, including Piers Gaveston and Roger Damory – a knight of Oxfordshire who was high in Edward's favour from about 1315 to 1318 – but she loathed and feared Hugh Despenser. And not without reason: Despenser seems to have gone out of his way to restrict Isabella's influence over her husband and even her access to Edward, and Edward allowed him to do so. When Edward went to war against Isabella's brother Charles IV of France in 1324, the king began to treat Isabella as an enemy alien and confiscated her lands.

Isabella was not the kind of person to tolerate such disrespect. In March 1325 Edward sent her to France to negotiate a peace settlement with her brother, which she did successfully. However, some months later, Edward made a fatal error. As Duke of Aquitaine and Count of Ponthieu, a peer of the realm of France, he owed homage to Charles IV as his liege lord. However, for various reasons Edward was reluctant to leave an England now seething with discontent and rebellion against his and Hugh Despenser's greedy and despotic rule. Edward therefore sent his elder son and heir, Edward of Windsor – not quite



Charles le bel recevant la **R**eine d'Angleterre.

Isabella is received by her brother, King Charles IV of France, in 1325 in an illustration from a later edition of Froissart's *Chronicles*

A 15th-century illustration of Roger Mortimer. Isabella's ally (and reputed lover) helped her invade England and enriched himself during their joint rule



Hugh Despenser, favourite of Edward II, is disembowelled and castrated in 1326 in an illustration from a 15th-century edition of Froissart's *Chronicles*. This brutal execution was a reprisal for Despenser's treatment of Isabella during Edward's reign

13 years old – in his place to perform the ceremony in September 1325.

With her son under her control and under the protection of her brother, Isabella imposed an ultimatum on Edward: before she would return to him in England with his son, he must send Despenser away from court and allow her to resume her normal married life and her rightful position as queen, and restore her lands. Edward, who was highly dependent on Despenser, refused. Isabella had no choice but to remain in France.

She began some kind of relationship with an English baron named Roger Mortimer, who had been imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1322 after taking part in a baronial rebellion against the king and his favourite but escaped in 1323. Mortimer was a man with the ability and the will to lead an invasion of England and destroy Hugh Despenser and his father, the Earl of Winchester – and, if need be, to bring down the king himself.

Although the relationship between Isabella and Mortimer has been romanticised to a considerable degree in much modern literature, it is far more likely to

have been a pragmatic political alliance than a passionate love affair, at least in the beginning.

Isabella betrothed her son Edward to a daughter of the Count of Hainault (in what's now Belgium) in order to secure ships, mercenaries and cash with which to invade England. Her expeditionary force arrived in England on 24 September 1326 – the first such assault since her great-great-grandfather Louis of France had attempted to wrest the English throne from Edward II's great-grandfather King John in 1216. The king's support collapsed almost

Isabella's greed and self-interest soon made her unpopular. It seems that she had little capacity for learning from her husband's mistakes

immediately, and the queen was joined by his half-brother the Earl of Norfolk (another half-brother, the Earl of Kent, was already with her) and his cousin the Earl of Lancaster. Hugh Despenser, his father and another of the king's loyal allies, the Earl of Arundel, were captured and grotesquely executed.

Abdication and succession

A parliament held in London at the beginning of 1327 decided that Edward II must be forced to abdicate his throne in favour of his 14-year-old son Edward. Finally accepting that he had no other choice, he did so. Edward III's reign began on 25 January 1327 – his parents' 19th wedding anniversary. The young king married Philippa of Hainault a year later.

A regency council was set up to rule the country in Edward III's name until he came of age. Though Queen Isabella and Roger Mortimer were not appointed members of this council, it seems that they ruled England for several years. Within a very short time their greed and self-interest made them as unpopular as Edward II and Hugh Despenser had been. It seems that Isabella



Isabella presents her son, Edward of Windsor – later crowned Edward III of England – to her brother Charles IV of France in the right-hand illustration. The left-hand picture shows Froissart handing his *Chronicles* to Edward III

had little capacity for learning from her husband's mistakes.

In the meantime, the death of the former Edward II at Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire on 21 September 1327 was announced, and his funeral was held at St Peter's Abbey, Gloucester (now Gloucester Cathedral) on 20 December 1327. How Edward died, whether by suffocation or illness or something else – the infamous red-hot poker is a later invention and dismissed by modern experts – or whether Edward even died there at all is still a matter of passionate debate (read more on page 64). There is, however, no real reason to suppose that Isabella of France – who sent him gifts while he was in captivity in 1327 – ordered the murder of her own husband.

Edward III's first child – a son, Edward of Woodstock – was born on 15 June 1330 when the king was 17 and already chafing under the tutelage of his mother and her despised favourite. On 19 October 1330, still a month short of his 18th birthday, the king launched a dramatic coup against the pair at Nottingham Castle, and had Mortimer hanged on 29 November. Isabella was held under house arrest for a while, and

forced to give up the vast lands and income she had appropriated. She had awarded herself 20,000 marks (£13,333) a year – possibly the largest income of anyone in England (except kings) in the entire Middle Ages. No wonder Edward III found his coffers almost entirely empty.

Dowager queen

Isabella of France was of high royal birth, and her son treated her with respect and consideration; he claimed the throne of France through his mother, so could hardly imprison her. After a short period of detention she was freed, and some years later was restored to her pre-1324 income of £4,500. For more than a quarter of a century Isabella lived an entirely conventional life as a dowager queen, travelling between her estates, entertaining many royal and noble guests, listening to minstrels and spending vast sums of money on clothes and jewels. The idea that her son locked her up in Castle Rising in Norfolk and that she went mad is merely a (much later) fabrication with no basis in fact.

The dowager queen of England died at Hertford Castle on 22 August 1358, aged 62

or 63, and was buried on 27 November at the fashionable Greyfriars church in London. Her aunt Marguerite of France, second queen of Edward I, was also buried here, and so, four years later, was Isabella's daughter Joan of the Tower, Queen of Scotland. Roger Mortimer, however, was not: the often-repeated tale that Isabella chose to lie for eternity next to her long-dead but never forgotten lover is a romantic myth.

The dowager queen was buried with the clothes she had worn at her wedding to Edward II 50 years previously – and, according to a rather later tradition, with his heart on her breast. Sadly, the Greyfriars church was destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666, rebuilt then destroyed again by bombs in the Second World War. The final resting place of the she-wolf of France is lost. **H**

Kathryn Warner is an author of books including *Edward II: The Unconventional King* (Amberley Publishing, 2015)

DISCOVER MORE

BOOK

► **Isabella of France: The Rebel Queen** by Kathryn Warner (Amberley Publishing, 2016)

An **A** to **Z** of the Plantagenets

Derek Wilson presents the key moments and personalities of a royal dynasty that was crucial in developing England's national identity



The tomb of Henry II, England's first Plantagenet king, in Fontevraud Abbey in Anjou, France

The Plantagenet dynasty ruled England from 1154 to 1485 – longer than any other royal family. Over such a lengthy period, the country and the way it was ruled changed enormously. At the beginning England was just one part of a loose confederation of states, most of which lay in what is now France. Gradually the kings lost control of their lands beyond the channel and by 1485 only Calais was left.

One reason for this contraction was that the barons, on whom the crown relied, gradually identified themselves with their English estates and lost interest in foreign adventures. The Plantagenets tried to extend their rule over Wales (successfully), Scotland (unsuccessfully) and Ireland (with partial success). These were the centuries that witnessed the political struggles between the king and the barons – struggles that defined the basic rights of subjects and established parliament as a partner in government.

Over the following pages we identify 26 of the key moments, places, concepts and characters of these transformative centuries.

A is for *Anjou*

This county, largely corresponding to the modern French *department* of Maine-et-Loire, was inherited by Geoffrey IV, known as 'Plantagenet' (reputedly because he took a sprig of broom – *Planta genista* – as his badge), in 1129. When Henry I died in 1135, Geoffrey claimed the duchy of Normandy in right of his wife, Matilda (see page 99). Geoffrey's son, who was to become Henry II of England in 1154, succeeded to the duchy and went on to hold it with England, Normandy and most of western France. Together, these lands formed the Plantagenet or Angevin 'empire'.

B is for Bruce

Edward I tried hard to extend effective rule over all the British mainland and in 1292 appointed John Balliol as a puppet king in Scotland. Robert Bruce, allegedly descended from one of William I's barons, was a rival claimant.

In 1298, after the resignation of popular leader William Wallace, Bruce was appointed guardian of Scotland and in 1306 he had himself crowned king. Edward drove him into exile but after the death of the English king the following year his incompetent successor, Edward II, failed to capitalise on his father's progress. Bruce returned and achieved victory over the English at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314.

C is for Clarendon Constitutions

This document was presented by Henry II to his bishops at the Palace of Clarendon, near Salisbury, in 1164 in his effort to increase royal control over the English church. Its 16 points claimed ancient custom in support of the superiority of royal over ecclesiastical justice. Archbishop Thomas Becket resisted Henry's will and fled to France, from where he encouraged those who opposed the king. Becket's defiance would end in his murder in 1170. The relationship between ecclesiastical and civil courts continued to cause problems throughout the Middle Ages.

D is for Despensers

In about 1312 Hugh Despenser the Younger, a baron of good lineage, began to establish influence over the weak Edward II. The leading peers resented Despenser's power and the lands and titles Edward showered on his favourite.

In 1321 the powerful Marcher lord Roger Mortimer led a rebellion against Edward before fleeing to France in 1323 – where he was joined by Edward's queen, Isabella. Mortimer and Isabella returned to England in 1326, and captured the king and his allies. Hugh Despenser was executed at Hereford, after his father had suffered the same fate in Bristol. As for Edward, he was reportedly killed in Berkeley Castle in 1327 (though his demise is disputed).

E is for Eleanor of Aquitaine

Eleanor was the daughter of William X of Aquitaine, whose territory embraced much of central and south-west France. She married twice – first Louis VII of France and then, in 1152, the future Henry II of England and Normandy. After Eleanor backed her sons' rebellions against their father, Henry kept her in honourable confinement. Following Henry's death in 1189 she exercised great influence over her two surviving sons, Richard (King of England 1189–99) and his successor, John. Read more about Eleanor on page 56.

The leading peers resented the **lands and titles** Edward showered on his favourite

F is for fealty

Meaning 'faithfulness', this was the glue that held feudal society together because it fixed the mutual responsibility of lords and vassals. The taking of an oath, sworn on the Bible or a holy relic, was vital to the holding of any property – castle, town, manor, tenement, etc – and the obligation of the tenant involved military service or payment in cash or kind. Oaths were also key to the running of merchant guilds. However, as time passed, complications of inheritance and the subdivisions of property rendered the feudal system complex, cumbersome and, ultimately, unworkable.



The execution of the Despensers, as depicted in the 15th-century *St Alban's Chronicle*



Giotto di Bondone's fresco shows Pope Innocent III, who famously placed England under interdict

G is for Grosseteste

Bishop Robert Grosseteste was the most brilliant scholar and church leader of his generation. Because of his independent mind he is considered by many to have been a forerunner of the Reformation. He was a lecturer at Oxford, became bishop of Lincoln in 1235 and wrote treatises on theology, natural sciences, astronomy, mathematics, poetry and the classics.

He fearlessly rooted out corruption in his diocese, challenged the king when he believed he was wrong and in 1250 travelled to Rome to complain about corruption in the papal court.

H is for Henry III

Henry, the longest reigning monarch of the Plantagenet dynasty, ascended the throne at the age of nine in 1216 and died 56 years later. He loved religious and royal ritual, and spent extravagantly on buildings designed to emphasise the importance of the church and the crown. The rebuilding or enlarging of Westminster Abbey, Westminster Hall and the Tower of London were among Henry's gifts to posterity.

I is for interdict

Meaning 'prohibition', this was an order, issued by a pope or bishop, forbidding clergy to offer individuals any of the rites of the church. This spiritual sanction was terrifying for people who depended on their priests for confession,

absolution, baptism and the last rites. Popes used this ultimate sanction against kings who had displeased them. In 1170 Henry II was forced, by fear of papal interdict, to allow the exiled Thomas Becket to return. And from 1208 to 1213 England was placed under interdict by Pope Innocent III because King John refused to appoint Stephen Langton as archbishop of Canterbury.



J is for John of Gaunt

This younger son of Edward III was born in Ghent (hence his name) in 1340. When his father died in 1377, leaving the crown to his grandson Richard II, John became the leading political figure, causing controversy through his efforts to make the crown independent of the church. When John's son Henry Bolingbroke rebelled against Richard, John supported the king but was torn between dynastic ambition and loyalty to the throne.



K is for kingship

Conflicting ideas about royal authority underlaid most of the major disputes of the Plantagenet centuries. The descendants of William the Conqueror claimed to rule by 'the grace of God'. Ecclesiastical theorists insisted that kings must acknowledge the pope as above all earthly rulers. Barons demanded a say in the conduct of government. The main outcome of attempts to define the rights and duties of kings and subjects – including Magna Carta – led to the development of parliament, which grew out of the king's 'great council'.

L is for Llywelyn the last

Llywelyn ap Gruffudd was one of the last members of a native Welsh dynasty to establish independence from the Anglo-Norman invaders. From 1256 to 1267 he threw out several English marcher lords and styled himself Prince of Wales. By the Treaty of Montgomery (1267), Henry III was forced to acknowledge Llywelyn's position but Edward I, who succeeded his father in 1272, renewed the war. Edward won over some of the Welsh chiefs, built several castles as military outposts and imposed the Treaty of Aberconwy (1277). Llywelyn was killed at the battle of Orewin Bridge near Cilmeri in 1282.

M is for Montfort

Simon de Montfort was one of Henry III's most trusted councillors. However, his heavy-handed rule as governor of Gascony turned Henry against him. By 1258 Montfort had emerged as the leader of baronial opposition that, in the 'Mad Parliament', enacted the Provisions of Oxford to curb arbitrary royal power. After defeating the king in the battle of Lewes, Montfort summoned a parliament that included shire knights and burgesses – a major step in the development of parliamentary representation. Montfort was slain at the battle of Evesham in August 1265.

BELOW: The death of Simon de Montfort at the battle of Evesham, as shown in a 14th-century manuscript

N is for Normandy

The Duchy of Normandy was united to the English crown during the reigns of Henry II and Richard I but in 1204 Philip II of France grabbed it from King John. Henry III made repeated efforts to recover the duchy but in 1259 was obliged to abandon his claim by the terms of a treaty that enabled him to retain Gascony and the Channel Islands (or îles Anglo-Normandes).

The English were never reconciled to the loss of this territory and in 1417 Henry V reclaimed it. Normandy was controlled by his brother, the Duke of Bedford, until 1435 but, during the reign of Henry VI, the French won it back.

O is for Oldcastle

Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, was a substantial landholder and a soldier who served valiantly in the French wars and was favoured by the future Henry V. However, he was a Lollard – a believer in the 'heresies' of John Wycliffe. Having failed to dissuade him from his opinions, Henry allowed his friend to face trial by a church court in 1413. Oldcastle was condemned to be burned but managed to escape from the Tower. He remained a fugitive until 1417, when he was executed as a heretic and a traitor. Oldcastle's significance lies in the widespread support that Lollard criticism of the church enjoyed at all levels of society.

Henry allowed his friend to face trial by a church court in 1413



P is for plague

Bubonic and pneumonic plague, caused by a bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, swept across western Europe in a number of epidemics from the mid-14th century onwards. The worst visitation was the Black Death, which arrived in the summer of 1348 and spread rapidly across the British Isles, claiming the lives of between one-third and half of the population. It disrupted every aspect of life, but its most important long-term effect was hastening the collapse of the feudal system. A shortage of labourers meant that those who survived could charge high prices for their services, rather than having to accept the terms imposed by landlords.

RIGHT: **Flagellants in Flanders scourge themselves in an effort to free the world of the Black Death, 1349**

Q is for Quo warranto

In 1274, Edward I set about tidying up the confusion over feudal landholding rights that had developed largely as a result of frequent internal wars. Commissioners were despatched, empowered by writs of *Quo warranto* ('By what right'). They accepted written or sworn testimony by local people as proof of property title. The *Quo warranto* statute of 1290 decreed that: "Every liberty... belongs to the crown, unless he who has it has sufficient warrant either by charter or from time immemorial." This process continued during the reigns of Edward I, Edward II and Edward III, and was an important aspect of the development of statute law.

R is for Richard II

Richard came to the throne at the age of ten and had to cope with a nation badly dislocated by the effects of the Black Death. He showed courage in dealing with the Peasants' Revolt (1381) but was unable to work with the barons. In 1388, when the 'Merciless Parliament' imposed severe restraints on him, he had his leading opponents arrested, executed or exiled.

In 1399, when Henry Bolingbroke (later Henry IV) defiantly returned from exile, malcontents flocked to join him. Richard was arrested and lodged in Pontefract Castle where he died, probably murdered.



S is for the battle of Shrewsbury

After his usurpation of the crown from Richard II, Henry IV needed the support of Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, and his kinsmen to control northern England. They, however, were dissatisfied with their treatment by the new king, and raised a rebellion.

Northumberland, his son 'Hotspur' and his brother the Earl of Worcester met Henry's army in battle on 21 July 1403, north of Shrewsbury. In one of the bloodiest conflicts fought on British soil, Hotspur was slain and Worcester executed. Northumberland was pardoned because Henry needed him.

The Black Death arrived in 1348, spread across the British Isles and **claimed the lives of over one-third of the population**

ALAMY



T is for Towton

The battle of Towton in Yorkshire was the bloodiest conflict in the Wars of the Roses – and, indeed, in all English history. On 29 March 1461 the Yorkist king Edward IV met a Lancastrian army led by the Duke of Somerset on a level plateau in the midst of a snowstorm. The Yorkists were outnumbered and almost defeated – but after several hours the Duke of Norfolk arrived with reinforcements. The Lancastrians fled, pursued by Edward's men who cut them down in great numbers. Estimates of numbers killed range from 28,000 to 38,000.

U is for Adam of Usk

Adam, one of the most reliable of the medieval chroniclers, was a canon lawyer in the service of the archbishop of Canterbury and close to the centre of national affairs. He chronicled the Peasants' Revolt and was with Henry Bolingbroke's army when it deposed Richard II in 1399, after which he visited the ex-king in the Tower. As a critic of Henry IV he was forced into exile and spent most of 1402–08 in Rome. Adam's *Chronicle*, covering 1377–1421, offers insights into political events, and depicts the places he visited on his travels.

V is for Valois dynasty

When Charles IV of France died without a male heir in 1328 his Valois cousin was crowned as Philip VI. Edward III of England, who had a more direct claim via his mother, challenged Philip – and in doing so triggered the Hundred Years' War.

After his defeat at the battle of Poitiers (1356) John II of France was held captive in England but Edward III settled for a huge ransom. War continued during the reigns of Charles V and Charles VI. England's Henry V married Charles VI's daughter, Catherine, on the understanding that the French crown would be settled on their son but, during Henry VI's reign, war resumed. Charles VII finally drove the English out after the battle of Castillon in 1453.

W is for William the Marshal

William, Earl of Pembroke was the outstanding political and military figure during the reigns of Henry II, Richard I and John. Henry II appointed him tutor to his eldest son, Henry, and while on crusade from 1184 to 1186 he drew praise as an example of a perfect Christian knight. In 1194 he became marshal of England (the country's military leader). It was largely because of William's mediation that John agreed the terms of Magna Carta. In his late sixties, William became regent during the minority of Henry III.

X is for exile

Kings or, in some cases, parliament could order people to leave the country without the need for their conviction in a court of law. During the reign of Edward II, parliament forced the king to exile royal favourites Piers Gaveston and the Despensers. Parliament also impeached Richard II's favourites Robert de Vere and Michael de la Pole, who fled into exile. Richard's deposition resulted from his attempt to have Henry Bolingbroke permanently exiled. Such examples pale into insignificance beside Edward I's exile of the entire Jewish community, numbering several thousand, in 1290.

Y is for York and Lancaster

The Wars of the Roses erupted in 1455, although their origins can be seen in discontents which had been rumbling since 1399. The two factions – York and Lancaster – vied for supremacy until 1485 when Richard III, the last Plantagenet, was defeated at the battle of Bosworth by Henry Tudor, a challenger from a cadet Lancastrian branch.

Richard III, **the last Plantagenet**, was defeated at the battle of Bosworth by Henry Tudor

Z is for Zouche

William de la Zouche was a typical medieval politician-bishop who became archbishop of York by papal appointment – in the face of opposition from Edward III. Despite his prickly relationship with Edward, Zouche defended the northern border faithfully as warden of the Scottish March. He died in 1352. **H**

Derek Wilson is the author of *The Plantagenets: The Kings that Made Britain* (Quercus, 2011)

EDWARD I

Man of principle
or *grasping*
opportunist?

Was the ferocious warrior-king driven by a deep commitment to the wellbeing of his people, or a fierce determination to enhance his own power? Historians have argued over this question for centuries, but **Caroline Burt** thinks she may have the answer



The seat of power

A contemporary illumination shows Edward I with priests and members of his court. The king prided himself on being a “debtor of justice to all”, but who did this justice benefit most: him or his people?

Ever since he breathed his last in Cumbria in 1307 – on his way to confront a Scottish rebellion – King Edward I has occupied a unique place in England’s popular consciousness. He is the conqueror of Scotland and Wales, the ferocious warrior-king who left behind him a string of castles so mighty that they still stand today, among them Caernarfon, Harlech and Beaumaris.

For centuries Edward also occupied a unique – and exalted – position in English historians’ pantheon of monarchs. Here was one of the country’s great medieval kings, credited not just with beginning the unification of the British Isles but also for masterminding vast improvements to England’s legal system.

He was “the truest man in all things”, gushed a contemporary ballad-writer. Another observed that no king “better sustained his land; all that he wished to do he brought wisely to a conclusion”.

Some 600 years later Bishop William Stubbs, one of the great medievalists of the era, declared that Edward “possessed in the highest degree the great qualities and manifold accomplishments of his race”. Twentieth-century historian Maurice Powicke was equally impressed, writing of the king’s “love of decency and order”.

Welsh and Scottish commentators have, not surprisingly, offered a more scathing assessment of Edward’s achievements. What is more surprising is that, in the 20th century, Edward’s Celtic critics increasingly found allies in England.

TF Tout, for example, referred to Edward as a “dour scheming autocrat”, while others argued that he was both ruthless in his pursuit of gain for his family members and over-ambitious in his plans at home. This, they contested, led to repeated failure and, according to one historian, “mediocrity”.

The most famous historian of Edward I, Michael Prestwich, has also made some criticisms of Edward. He has pointed, for example, to the fact that at his death in July 1307 the king left the country £200,000 in debt – a staggering sum in modern terms. In fact, by the time Prestwich wrote his biography of Edward in 1988 he was commenting that the king’s reputation had reached “a cyclic low”.

Prestwich was, in one sense, right: history is cyclical. In fact, over the past few years it seems that the pendulum has begun to swing back in Edward’s favour. In 2010 Andrew Spencer argued that the king fostered a good relationship with his nobility. John



A silver penny from 1279 bears the image of King Edward I

Maddicott has similarly pointed to the king’s success in cleaning up the mess that his father, Henry III, made of kingship – a mess that culminated in a bloody civil war in the 1260s. Edward, Maddicott argues, was intelligent, and was good at showing his subjects that he would not treat them as his father had done. He won their trust in the first few years of his reign when a number of civil-war rebels were at large and potentially able to make trouble for him.

The Edward effect

So the picture is constantly changing. But the question is: what picture *should* we paint of Edward?

The first problem facing those seeking to answer this question is that, until now, historians have not yet looked in any great detail at how Edward’s actions affected his people. In modern terms, that would be like examining government policy on the NHS but never assessing how the resulting changes played out on the ground. Did the provision of healthcare improve or deteriorate as a result?

Modern government is far more sophisticated than its medieval predecessors. All the same, a 13th-century king’s duties to his people were much the same as those of any latter-day government to its citizens. People expect to be defended from invasion by foreign powers and they expect governments to protect them and their

property from assault at home. How did Edward fare on this front? We know that he was accomplished at defending the nation, but we are yet to investigate in any great depth his success at maintaining order in England’s villages, towns and cities.

Another problem facing historians of Edward is that we have not yet examined whether there was any political philosophy – a set of ideas – that underpinned his kingship. This is not just about whether Edward had a game plan for kingship, but about what he actually believed. There are entire doctoral theses dedicated to what political beliefs informed the policies of modern leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. Yet this has simply not been the case with Edward I – nor, for that matter, with many other English medieval kings.

Some have argued that there is no need for such a study – because Edward’s reign wasn’t shaped by a single, overarching principle. Michael Prestwich wrote in 1996 that, though there is no doubt that Edward was “throughout imbued with a fierce determination to preserve, protect and enhance his rights as king ... my belief is that Edward was essentially an opportunist, and that his actions and policies are best explained in terms of their immediate circumstances.”

But is he right? Was there really no ideal behind Edward’s policies? Historians have never demurred from the view that Edward was a stickler for royal rights and authority. He began his reign with a massive enquiry (the so-called Hundred Rolls of 1274–75) into royal jurisdictional rights that he believed had been recently usurped, and followed this with a 20-year campaign to restore those rights. Edward also fought with successive archbishops of Canterbury about the limits of church jurisdiction in England, and went to war with both Wales and Scotland on the basis that their princes had failed to do their duties as his feudal vassals.

That Edward took a dim view of those who failed to defer to his royal authority is confirmed by his reaction to a territorial dispute between the earls of Gloucester and Hereford in the 1280s.

When the king returned to England from France to discover that the two earls were steadfastly ignoring all pleas to settle with each other – and had even resisted the entreaties of the archbishop of Canterbury to make peace – he sentenced them both to imprisonment.

It is through this incident, however, that I think we can come to a more sophisticated appreciation of what motivated Edward as king. He was, he told the warring earls, acting for his “crown and dignity” as “debtor of justice to all” and “guardian of the common

He was “**the truest man in all things**”, gushed a contemporary ballad-writer

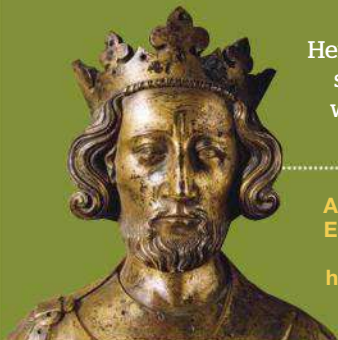
A Londres vit p' sojourner
 loec fu tot le p'ner



Returning to the capital
 Edward I rides to London in
 a mid-14th-century illumina-
 tion from the French verse
 novel *Roman de Brut* by the
 Norman poet Wace

A loec par maledie languist
 E t morut amy dieu volunt
 A loec esteit enseuelee
 A Westmonster p' solepunte
E Albard sun fir apres regnast
 Cil tuit la terre si le gardast
 Cil fu de grant poestie
 Cil menutur bien ses franchises
 E sent Eglise a mult l'amort
 E eites a possessions lour donet

The eventful reign of Edward I



Henry III dies while his son Edward is on his way back to England from crusade

A bronze effigy of Edward I's father, Henry III, on his tomb in Westminster Abbey

The first Welsh war of Edward's reign is prompted by the Welsh prince Llywelyn ap Gruffudd's failure to pay homage to Edward as his new feudal overlord following Henry III's death. Llywelyn is defeated

November 1272

August–October 1274



A miniature from *Flores Historiarum* by Matthew Paris shows Edward I's coronation

Edward returns to England and is crowned king. He then changes all the sheriffs in England and launches the Hundred Rolls enquiries into royal jurisdictional rights and corrupt officials

1276–77

A second Welsh war is sparked by a rebellion by Llywelyn's brother, Dafydd. Edward conquers Wales

1282–83

Edward declares war on France following the confiscation of Gascony by the French king. Rebellion breaks out in Wales, protesting Edward's demands for taxation and military service

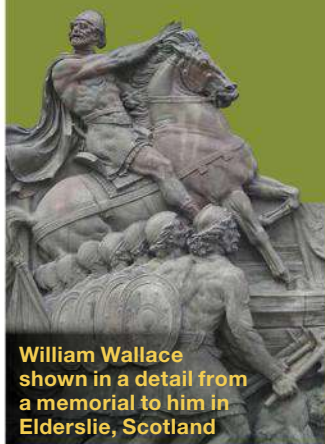


English troops are transferred by ship in a 14th-century illumination

1294

Scots attack Carlisle. After a successful English response, the Scots revolt the following year and famously inflict defeat on the English at the battle of Stirling Bridge

1296



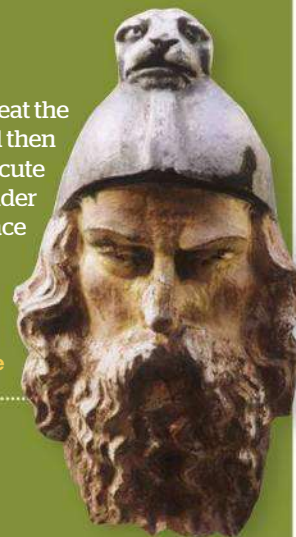
William Wallace shown in a detail from a memorial to him in Elderslie, Scotland

Edward's forces defeat the Scottish revolt and then capture and execute Scottish commander William Wallace

1297–1301

Barons and knights bring grievances to the king relating to recent taxation for the wars in Scotland and France. Compromises are agreed in the Confirmation of the Charters (1297) and the Articles on the Charters (1300)

A stone portrait head of Scottish resistance fighter William Wallace



1304–05

The 'trailbaston' enquiries address the disorder Edward had discovered in England at the end of the Scottish and French wars

Edward dies at Burgh-by-Sands in Cumbria, on his way to tackling the rebellion of Robert Bruce in Scotland, which had begun in 1306

July 1307:

utility". This suggests that Edward clearly equated the dignity of his office with the provision of justice to his people, not just with upholding crown rights. He made similar statements elsewhere both before and during his reign. In 1259, while still prince, he wrote to his chief officer in Chester that: "If common justice is denied to any one of our subjects by our bailiffs, we lose the favour of God and man, and our lordship is belittled." In 1278, he would preface a statute with a note that the "better administration of justice" was a requirement of "kingly office".

We could argue that all this adds up to what we might call enlightened self-interest, not a fundamental philosophy. To take the NHS analogy again, what this means is that you might not believe in universal healthcare as a principle, but you support it on the basis that, without it, you may one day be unable to afford treatment that you require.

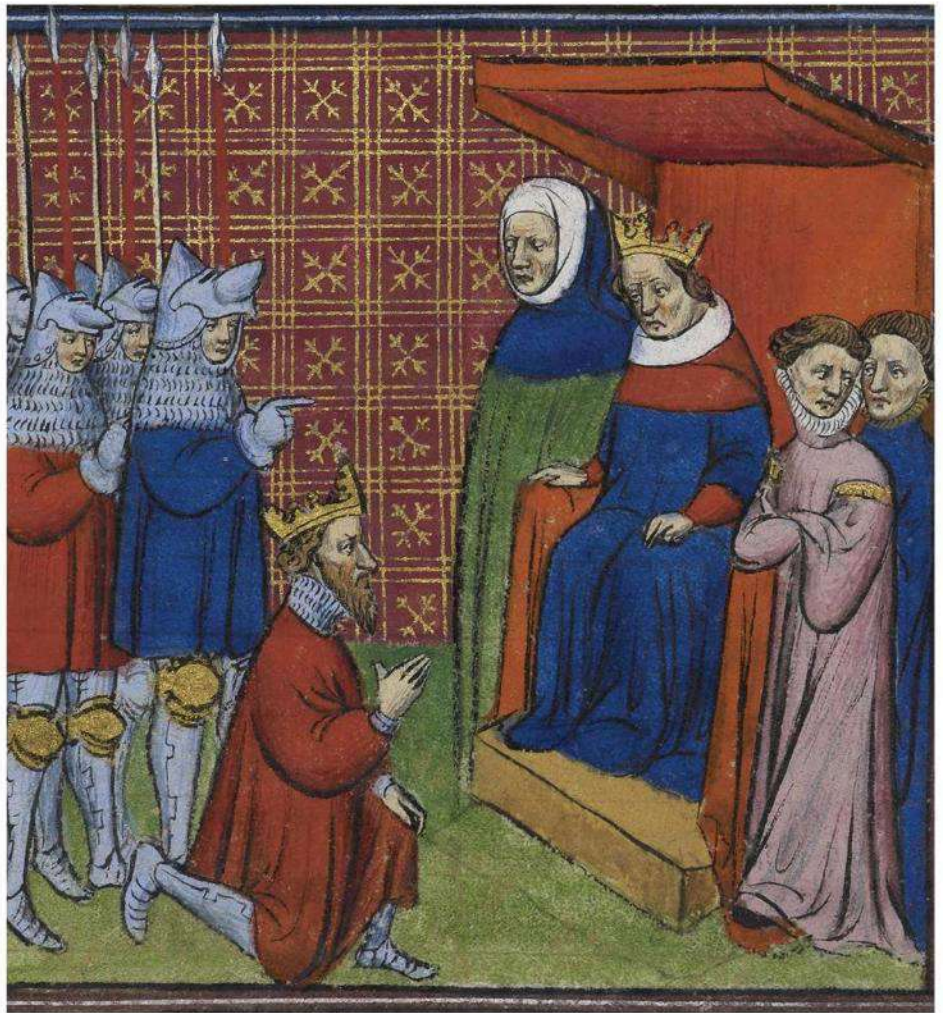
Courting favour

Which is true of Edward I? Without a doubt, he had a sense of things that were likely to win him favour with his subjects. He ordered wide-ranging enquiries into corrupt officials in the first year of his reign, and changed all the sheriffs in England. We can point to several other examples of popular royal policies, such as his decision to sack many of his judges in the late 1280s.

But examples of populism such as these don't help us answer the question. Rather, the best measure of whether a belief is a fundamental one is the extent to which a ruler maintains a commitment to it when it patently isn't popular. Here we are in luck, because Edward did just that in the late 1290s.

From 1294, Edward had been at war with the French king Philip IV, who had confiscated the English duchy of Gascony in south-west France. He had also been in Wales tackling a rebellion against military service and taxation, and had faced revolt in Scotland too, led most famously by William Wallace of *Braveheart* legend. War costs money – a lot of money – and by the late 1290s Edward was in a fix. He needed more cash, but his subjects had been bled white by his financial demands. Led by a number of nobles, they protested that they could not afford to continue as he wished. The earls also questioned elements of Edward's military strategy.

Yet Edward would not give in. His job, he argued, was to protect the "common good of the realm". His subjects had acknowledged that the military situation constituted an emergency; they were therefore obliged to support him financially and had no right to question his strategy. They in turn argued that it was not in the interests of the common good to oppress one's people with



A feeling of superiority

An illumination from the 14th-century *Chroniques de France ou de St Denis* shows John Balliol, king of Scots, paying homage to Edward

unaffordable burdens of taxation. It was a political impasse.

The king was finally forced, very much against his will, to make some concessions (which in calmer times he reversed), but he would not be moved on the fundamental point of principle: the king's *duty* was to protect the common good, and it was his *prerogative* to decide how to do so.

If Edward had been a hardened pragmatist, or had even understood the notion of enlightened self-interest, it is difficult to see how he could have acted in this way. He had a clear sense that kingship was about rights

Edward equated the dignity of his office with the **provision of justice to his people**, not just upholding crown rights

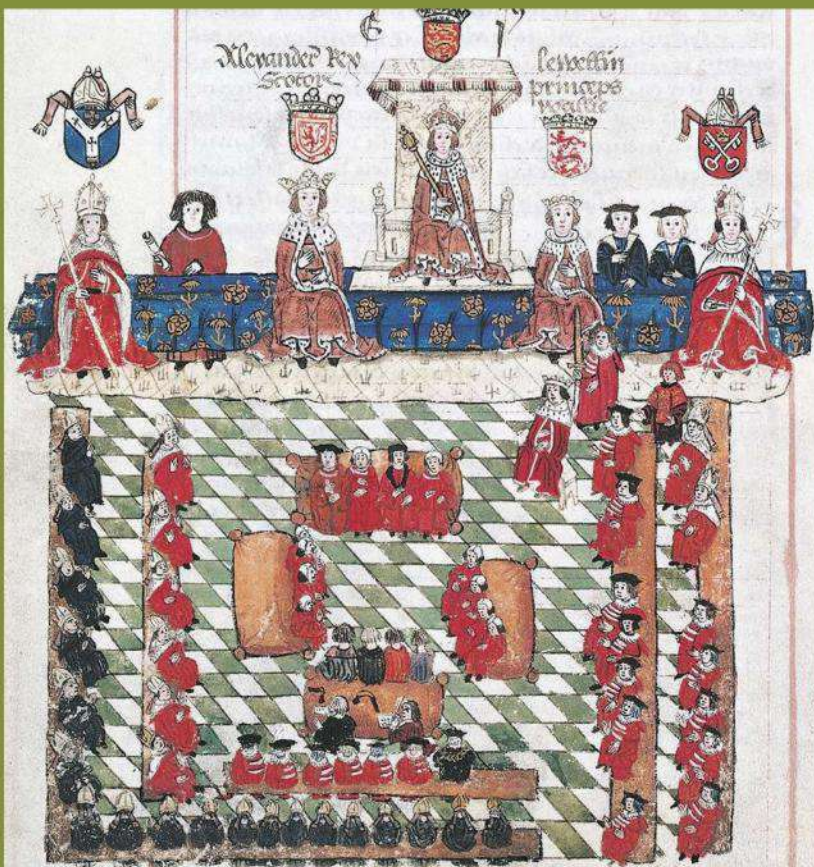
and responsibilities; failure in either respect brought the office and its holder into disrepute.

But what of the impact of Edwardian government? Did Edward's commitment to justice actually mean anything for his subjects in practice? The answer is yes. It should be remembered that medieval England had neither a professional police force nor a standing army. Instead, local men were tasked with keeping order by the crown, and they took those responsibilities seriously; they had to if order were not to collapse.

To ensure that they fulfilled their duties, and that they knew the eye of the king was upon them should they be inclined to indulge in some light corruption, Edward ordered repeated enquiries into the behaviour of his officialdom, collecting complaints, sometimes anonymously, from local people. At the same time he made great improvements to the legal system and to the administration of justice, and on the ground efforts were made to tackle disorder systematically.

When evil-doers were noticed in a county, the government was quick to issue orders to deal with them. In Kent in 1273 the king ordered a local judge to make enquiries into

Was Edward a successful king?



Edward attends a parliamentary meeting. The king took a dim view of those who failed to defer to his authority

No matter how far Edward was guided by the right principles, his inflexibility led at times to conflict with his subjects. In fact, he should arguably have been more pragmatic than he was.

Edward was keen to protect and enhance his family's landed interests, and some of those nobles who bore the brunt of this felt understandably aggrieved. Perhaps most famous of these was Robert Ferrers, Earl of Derby, whose lands were taken by Edward's brother following the civil war of the 1250s and 1260s and were never returned.

It should be stressed, though, that in this Edward was not far out of line with a number of other kings, and historians recently have been more inclined to stress the good relationship he developed with his nobility. He well understood the core elements of his duties as king, and carried them out with great success. He responded quickly and decisively to Scottish, Welsh and French rebellions and threats.

Equally, at home Edward worked hard to maintain order and to restore it where it had broken down. Again and again the king's responses to problems were innovative and intelligent. If Edward's plans were sometimes over-ambitious, they nevertheless more often achieved great success.

It would certainly seem, then, that we can make more of an argument for Edward's being one of medieval England's more successful reigns than for highlighting the few areas in which he fell short.

men who had committed murders there and who "propose to do worse things as the king hears for certain". There is strong evidence that all this had positive effects: there was a fall in the number of disputes, and serious crime, though far from non-existent, was regularly dealt with where it arose.

Yet when the country was at war, order was much harder to maintain. Local law-enforcement officers were often away fighting, and large bands of heavily armed troops were moving through the country. In short, it was a recipe for violence and disorder. When Edward finally returned from wars in France and Scotland in the early 1300s he was consequently faced with one of the worst situations any medieval king had to endure. In response he was typically ambitious, ordering the most wide-ranging criminal investigations ever yet seen in England. When he died in 1307, it seems clear that his efforts were bearing fruit.

Edward I was in many ways a remarkable king – but how different was he from other medieval monarchs? In my opinion, he easily stands comparison with the best kings of the

period: Henry II, Edward III and Henry V. But did they have such a clear conceptual understanding of kingship as Edward? This has never been systematically investigated, yet it seems that the ideas upon which Edward drew were entirely mainstream – all contemporary writers acknowledged that the duty of the king was to protect the common good, and that he was steward of his office.

All this was of course deeply religious in its inspiration (this was the age of great political theologians such as Thomas Aquinas), something that has often recently been

alluded to in reference to the motivations of our own Queen Elizabeth II. Indeed, this comparison with our current monarch reinforces a further, crucial point. Despite the passing of seven centuries, monarchy and the duties of political office have not changed – even if the age is now one of constitutional monarchy and prime ministerial office. **H**

Caroline Burt is a fellow at Pembroke College, Cambridge, specialising in 13th- and 14th-century history. She is the author of *Edward I and the Governance of England, 1272–1307* (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

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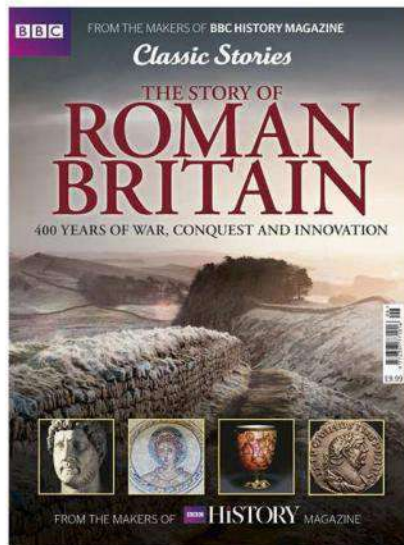
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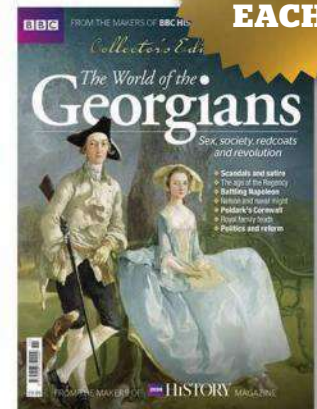
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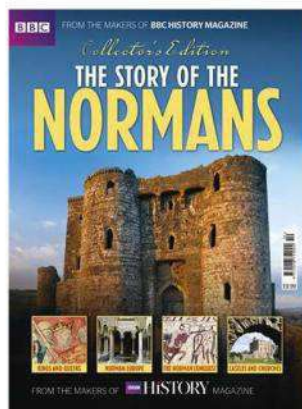
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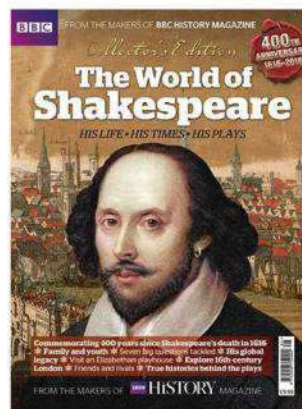
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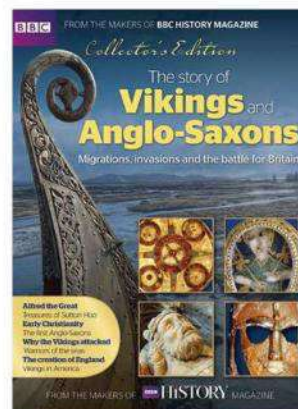
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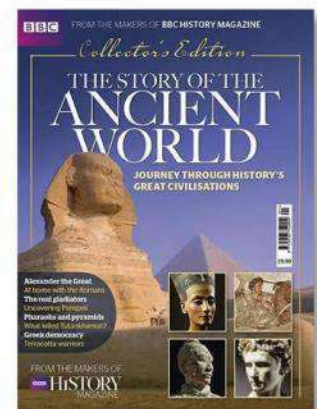
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Led into captivity?

This wall painting in the chapel of Sainte-Radegonde at Chinon has often been interpreted as showing Eleanor of Aquitaine with Henry II, perhaps at the moment he led her into captivity in 1174. In fact, it is more likely to show a scene from the life of Saint Radegonde – though the artist may have had Eleanor and Henry in mind when he painted it

Henry II and Richard I are among England's most celebrated kings. But when it came to resourcefulness, political nous and **sheer staying power**, neither were the equal of the woman who bound them: **Eleanor of Aquitaine**

by **Lindy Grant**

When Richard the Lionheart inherited his father's realms in 1189, one of his first acts as king was to

release his mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, from imprisonment.

But Richard did a lot more than just free Eleanor from the house arrest under which she had languished for 15 years: he entrusted her with the governance of England while he secured his continental realms. And so the newly liberated queen mother was soon progressing around the kingdom with a 'regal' court, judging cases and organising the release of prisoners – a traditional demonstration of magnanimity by a new ruler.

The contrast between Richard and his immediate predecessor as king couldn't have been more stark. For it was Henry II, Richard's father, who had imprisoned Eleanor as a punishment for supporting their sons' first rebellion against him.

Whereas Henry had locked up Eleanor, Richard gave her responsibility for his most prestigious territory at the delicate moment of the succession. So who *was* this woman who could inspire such faith, and such fear, in two of the most formidable men to wear the English crown?

Great affairs of state

Eleanor of Aquitaine lived an extraordinarily long, colourful and controversial life – one that, to modern eyes at least, has earned her a seat at medieval Europe's top table. Her prominence can, to a large extent, be traced

to her choice of husbands. She was married to two kings – Louis VII of France and Henry II of England – and, with the latter, produced three monarchs of England: Henry the Young King, Richard the Lionheart and King John.

Like most medieval queens, Eleanor's influence was very much dependent on her relationship with the king, whether that was her son or her husband. Yet she was no passive observer of the great affairs of state. She was fiery, highly ambitious and intensely involved in raw power-politics for decades. She governed nations, sponsored rebellions and offered counsel to her sons in the final years of her long life, when most of her contemporaries had been dead for years. In short, she was one of the most influential figures in 12th-century Europe.

Given Eleanor's huge and enduring influence – and her sex – it's hardly

surprising that she fascinated contemporary commentators. She commanded widespread admiration but was also regarded as sexually dangerous, even attracting what is often called a 'black legend'. Gervase of Canterbury called her "an extremely astute woman... but flighty". Her grandfather, Duke William IX of Aquitaine, was one of the first French poets to compose the possibly Islamic-influenced 'courtly love' songs so beloved of the aristocracy. Perhaps this is what inspired the 13th-century French chronicler, the Minstrel of Reims, to concoct an affair between Eleanor and the great Muslim leader Saladin.

Scandalous sister

Eleanor of Aquitaine's life was hardly a rags-to-riches story. She was born, around 1122–24, to Duke William X of Aquitaine who, as he had no surviving sons, named her as the heiress to the duchy in 1137. On his deathbed William commended Eleanor to the protection of his overlord, the king of France, who promptly married her off to his own son and heir. Almost immediately, the old king followed William to the grave, and his son became king as Louis VII. Eleanor, perhaps barely into her teens, was now queen of France.

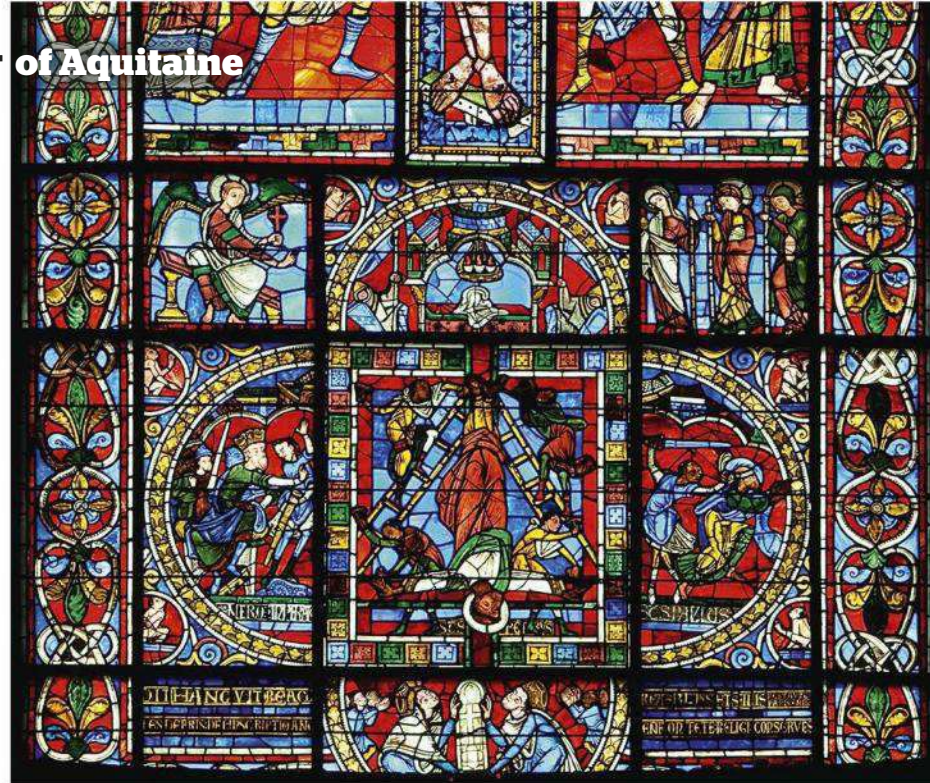
Though Louis adored Eleanor, he ceded little power to her, often issuing charters for Aquitaine with no reference to his young wife. He was, however, susceptible to her influence. In 1141 the Count of Vermandois, a cousin of the king, married Eleanor's younger sister Petronilla. But there was a problem: the count was already married to a niece of the Count of Champagne. The marriage was bigamous – a crime for which the newly-weds were excommunicated.

If that wasn't bad enough for Eleanor's reputation, Louis promptly invaded Champagne and inadvertently burned down a church at Vitry – along with the women and children who had taken refuge in it. Many assumed that Eleanor heavily influenced the king's violent response.

This was not the only area in which sex and politics made for a toxic mix. Eleanor failed to provide Louis VII with an heir – the most important duty of the queen. The writer of a life of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux claimed that Eleanor sought the advice of the austere and unworldly Cistercian abbot on how she might give birth to a son.

Bernard advised her to pray, and to make peace between her husband and the Count of Champagne. It wasn't long before Eleanor gave birth to her first child – but it was a daughter, not the desired son and heir.

In 1144 the Christian state of Edessa (in what's now south-east Turkey) fell to Muslim



A window on the Angevin world

The east window of Poitiers Cathedral, dating from 1166–73, was given to the cathedral by Eleanor, Henry II and four of their children. Henry and Eleanor are shown at the bottom holding an image of the window. The four figures above them are probably their sons

forces, and the pope called for a new crusade. Louis was quick to take the cross, and when he set off in April 1147 he was accompanied by Eleanor and other ladies of the court.

There was some contemporary criticism of the way women and non-combatants slowed the crusading army's pace. But the crusades were never just military enterprises. They were regarded as pilgrimages – and both Eleanor and Louis felt the need for penance.

The crusade was a disaster. The Turks decimated Louis and Eleanor's army in Asia Minor, and when the couple reached the court of Eleanor's uncle Raymond, prince of Antioch, trouble broke out again. Raymond wanted to concentrate on retaking Edessa; Louis insisted that they should march on to the Holy Land. Eleanor's decision to support her uncle in the dispute made the faultlines in her marriage with Louis all too clear.

Louis was furious, and forced his wife to come with him. Rumours were soon

spreading that Eleanor and her uncle had flirted outrageously, leaving Louis overcome with jealousy. Soon relations between the two were so bad that Eleanor asked Louis for a divorce, on the grounds that they were related within the degrees prohibited by the church.

In 1149 Louis and Eleanor returned to France via Rome. The pope, Eugenius III, did his best to reconcile the king and queen – according to John of Salisbury's racy history of the papal court, the pope more or less tucked them in to bed together.

End of a marriage

But the marriage was irretrievable. Fifteen years had produced nothing more useful than two daughters. It was Eleanor who first suggested divorce, but Louis who now pursued it. He convoked a great council at Beaugency that annulled the union on the grounds of consanguinity.

Eleanor headed for Poitiers. Her marriage had left her with an unenviable reputation as a quarrelsome and perhaps inappropriately flirtatious wife whose political influence might be baleful and whose sister was a bigamist. For all that, as Duchess of Aquitaine Eleanor was a huge prize. Stretching from the Loire to the Pyrenees, Aquitaine was rich in resources: the wines, for which Bordeaux is still known, were already renowned; its long coast had important salt pans; and Bordeaux and La Rochelle were major trading ports.

Another marriage was in Eleanor's interests, too: she was conscious of her

Eleanor's marriage left her with an unenviable reputation as a flirtatious wife, with a baleful political influence

The life of Eleanor of Aquitaine

Eleanor is born in either 1122 or 1124, daughter of Duke William X of Aquitaine and his wife Aliénor of Châtellerauld



A contemporary depiction of the Second Crusade

Louis and Eleanor go on the Second Crusade, where her relationship with her uncle, Raymond of Antioch, threatens to destroy their marriage

1122/1124

1137

Eleanor becomes Duchess of Aquitaine on her father's death, and is married to the heir to the French throne, who immediately becomes king of France as Louis VII



Eleanor weds Louis in an image from the Chronique de St Denis

1141-44

Louis divorces Eleanor on the grounds of consanguinity. Eleanor marries Henry of Anjou, a claimant to the English throne

1147-49

Louis and Eleanor support the bigamous marriage of Eleanor's sister Petronilla to Count Ralph of Vermandois - despite opposition from the church and the Count of Champagne

1152

Eleanor's second husband, King Henry II of England



Henry succeeds to the English throne, and Henry and Eleanor are crowned king and queen of England at Westminster Abbey

1154

Henry installs Eleanor at Poitiers to rule Aquitaine for him alongside her son Richard, now made Count of Poitou

1168

Richard I depicted in a medieval floor tile, originally in Chertsey Abbey



1173-74

Eleanor joins her sons' rebellion against Henry, but is captured and imprisoned for the rest of Henry's lifetime

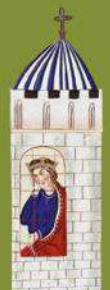
1189

Eleanor ensures the succession of her son John to the Angevin lands, rather than her grandson Arthur of Brittany

Richard succeeds to the Angevin realms, releases Eleanor and asks her to ensure the succession in England for him

1192-94

Eleanor stabilises England during Richard's captivity on the continent, raises his ransom and negotiates his release



King Richard languishes in prison in Vienna

1199



A Plantagenet monarch, possibly King John, is shown during a hunt

31 March 1204

Eleanor dies and is buried at Fontevraud. In June, Normandy falls to French king Philip Augustus

lineage, and she needed to provide a male heir to succeed her as Duke of Aquitaine. She seems to have made her own choice: Henry, the young Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou, who had come to Louis' court in August 1151. She sent for him as soon as she reached safety in Poitiers, and in May 1152 they were married in Poitiers Cathedral. Louis, as overlord of both Eleanor and Duke Henry, tried to prevent the marriage and to hold on to the duchy of Aquitaine, but he lacked the military resources to do either.

Henry was very different from Louis. Grandson of Henry I of England, and son of the Empress Matilda (see box on page 71), he had, even as a young man, a powerful personality with a natural authority and decisiveness. In strength of personality, Eleanor and Henry were well matched. And Eleanor had no problem providing this husband with an heir: they had at least five sons and three daughters.

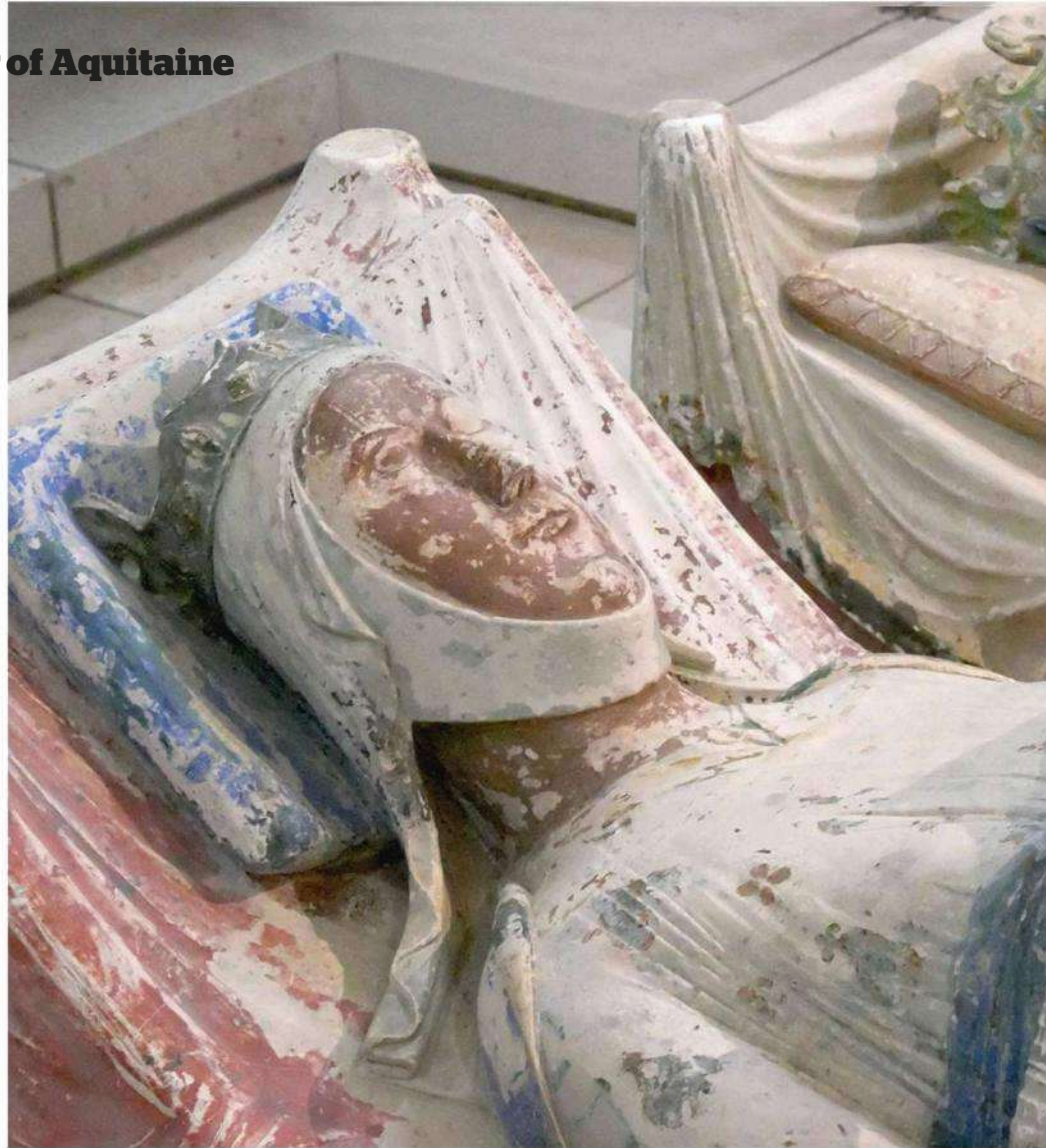
In October 1154, Henry succeeded to the English throne, adding England to the continental domains that he ruled already: Normandy, Greater Anjou, and Aquitaine in right of his wife. The Duchess of Aquitaine was once again a queen-consort.

Chafing at the bit

Though Henry was a far more energetic and formidable ruler than Louis, Eleanor wielded more power during her second marriage than her first. Henry made little attempt to impose real authority over Aquitaine; his realm was enormous, and the king could not be everywhere at once. During the first 14 years of his reign he often entrusted England to his queen to rule as his regent, while he concerned himself with his continental lands. In 1165–66 Eleanor governed Anjou for Henry. Then, in 1168, the king installed Eleanor at Poitiers, back in the duchy of her birth.

Henry may have been among Europe's most powerful rulers but by 1170 things were beginning to go wrong. He had to do penance for the murder of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, in which he was implicated. And as his sons grew up they became power-hungry. Henry had the eldest, also Henry, crowned associate king (the 'Young King') of England in 1170, and gave Poitou and Brittany to Richard and Geoffrey respectively. But still the sons chafed under the father's authority.

In April 1173 they broke out in open rebellion. Many of the aristocracy of the Angevin realms supported the young princes – the coming men – against the old king. Eleanor also sided with her sons against her husband; indeed, most contemporary



chroniclers thought that she was instrumental in persuading them to revolt.

It seems that Eleanor, too, may have tired of Henry's authoritarian ways. She probably wanted more freedom to rule Aquitaine. Perhaps she resented her husband's many and increasing infidelities. Undoubtedly she begrudged him sidelining her as queen.

Whatever her motivation, it was the greatest mistake of her life. She was captured by Henry's forces as she tried to escape from Poitou to the French court. Many had assumed that Henry was finished. As it turned out, that was far from the case.

The authority with which **Eleanor** secured the kingdom for Richard reflects her political acumen and experience

The old king did not humiliate his sons in victory. He came to terms with them, and they maintained an uneasy peace until the late 1180s. But he did not forgive the treachery of his queen. Eleanor spent the rest of his reign as his prisoner, kept under house arrest – albeit in appropriate luxury. Occasionally, Henry brought her out to play the queenly role at one of his great courtly gatherings. Mainly, though, she was kept far from the court. Politically, she was impotent. These must have been the most frustrating years of her life.

Richard's accession in 1189 changed that. The effortless authority with which Eleanor secured the kingdom for her son reflects her political acumen and her considerable experience as a ruler. Eleanor held the great Angevin realm together when Richard was captured by Duke Leopold of Austria while returning from crusade in 1192. As Richard endured captivity, his younger brother John plotted with the new king of France, Philip Augustus, to take the throne – until Eleanor arrived back in England and dealt with him. She raised the huge sum of 150,000 marks for Richard's ransom and negotiated her son's release, demanding help from the pope in a letter from



Reunited in death

Eleanor lies alongside her second husband, Henry II, at Fontevraud Abbey in Anjou. Whereas Henry's effigy depicts him dressed in full royal regalia, as if on his way to burial, the queen lies awake, with a book in her hands. The couple's powerful personalities made them a formidable partnership but also ensured that when they fell out, they did so spectacularly

"Eleanor, by the wrath of God, Queen of England". Richard demonstrated his gratitude through the prominent role that he gave his mother at the coronation that marked his return in 1194.

Forced march

At Richard's death in 1199, it was Eleanor who assured the succession of John to the Angevin lands. John had a potential rival in his nephew Arthur, Count of Brittany, son of John's older brother Geoffrey. But Richard had left his realm to John on his deathbed, and Eleanor supported his decision, rallying support for John in Anjou and Normandy. At one point it appeared that Eleanor's loyalty to John would cost her dear: Arthur went on the offensive, placing her under siege at Mirabeau. But Eleanor was rescued by her son, who executed a brilliant forced march to save her. Arthur promptly disappeared into John's dungeons.

Not content with championing her sons' claims to the English throne, Eleanor also helped secure two marriages designed to strengthen their grip on power. Back in 1191, when King Richard had wed Berengaria of Navarre in 1191, it was Eleanor who accompanied Berengaria from her home

kingdom to Sicily, prior to her marriage, which built an alliance with Navarre and protected Richard's southernmost territories.

Eleanor also played a starring role in the negotiations that would lead to a marriage linking King John's England with Philip Augustus's France. In 1200, as part of a treaty between the two nations, Philip insisted on the marriage of his own heir, the future Louis VIII, to one of John's nieces, a daughter of the king of Castile. The niece would be, as one chronicler put it, "in her own person the guarantee of peace". Since John had no direct heir at the time, it was a marriage on which the future of the Angevin realm might turn.

John sent Eleanor to Castile to finalise the negotiations with the king of Castile and his queen, Eleanor's daughter. There Eleanor chose the most suitable of her granddaughters, and then accompanied her back across the Pyrenees and up through Aquitaine. Doubtless she acquainted the 12-year-old with the political vortex into which she would be thrown. She had chosen well. Blanche of Castile turned out to be one of the greatest queens of the Middle Ages, a woman whose appetite and aptitude for holding power was equal to Eleanor's.

For the last decade of her life Eleanor established herself at Fontevraud, a distinguished nunnery on the border of Anjou and Poitou. She did not become a nun, but lived in her own house within the precinct of the abbey. Henry lay buried in the nun's choir. Richard had ordered his own burial there, and when he died Eleanor brought his body to the abbey she now regarded as her home. Soon her daughter Joanna joined her father and brother in what was fast becoming a family mausoleum.

And then, in March 1204, at the age of 80 or 82, Eleanor was laid to rest there, too. Her last months were clouded by news of the implosion of the Angevin realm at the hands of the king of France. It was a sad end to what was one of medieval Europe's most remarkable – and, in many ways, triumphant – lives. **III**

Lindy Grant is professor of medieval history at the University of Reading. Her books include *Blanche of Castile, Queen of France* (Yale University Press, 2016)

DISCOVER MORE

LISTEN AGAIN

► To listen to Melvyn Bragg discuss Eleanor of Aquitaine with guests including Lindy Grant on **In Our Time**, go to bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06yfthqk



Leading ladies

Five other women who changed the face of medieval Europe

Matilda of Scotland (c1080–1118)

Matilda was deeply trusted by her husband, Henry I, who usually left her to govern England while he dealt with Normandy. Of Scottish and Anglo-Saxon stock, she was a sophisticated patron of literature and the visual arts, and renowned for her piety and her generous religious benefactions.

Empress Matilda (1102–67)

On the death of her brother in 1120, Matilda became the sole heir of her father – Henry I of England – who tried to ensure that she would succeed him. Her cousin Stephen of Blois seized the English throne on Henry's death, and Matilda spent many years fighting for it, then – successfully – pursuing the claim of her son Henry to the crown. That son, crowned as Henry II, had great respect for his mother's advice and she governed Normandy for him until her death.

Matilda of Boulogne (c1105–52)

Heiress to the strategically important county of Boulogne, this Matilda was the wife of King Stephen, and Eleanor's immediate predecessor as queen of England. An educated cultural patron, Matilda proved a formidably effective queen after Stephen was captured in 1141.

Marie of Champagne (1145–98)

Alongside her husband, Henry the Liberal, Count of Champagne, Marie ran the most overtly literary court in western Europe. A highly effective political operator, Eleanor of Aquitaine's eldest daughter governed the county of Champagne on three separate occasions.

Blanche of Castile (1188–1252)

Eleanor's granddaughter was married to the heir to the French throne, the future Louis VIII. She and her husband tried unsuccessfully to take the English throne from King John in 1216–17. Louis VIII died in 1226 after a brief reign, leaving Blanche as regent for their young son, Louis IX (Saint Louis) until he came of age in 1234. She was widely regarded by contemporaries as a formidably effective queen regent, and as an important moral influence on her children.

TROUBLE

✧ **Was Edward II really murdered?**

Join the fierce debate between two historians

✧ **Edward III**

Why the monarch's military innovations proved crucial at Crécy

✧ **Richard the Lionheart: king of war**

How lessons learned on Crusade informed Richard's European campaigns

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Trace the roots of the row between Henry II and his former friend

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Challenge six common beliefs about the last Plantagenet king

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Follow Owain Glyndŵr's bloody uprising against English rule

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Was he a noble champion of the Scots or a murderous usurper?

✧ **A queen in a king's world**

Discover how Matilda's fight for the throne sparked a bloody civil war

✧ **Did Richard II side with the peasants?**

Explore the boy-king's motives in his confrontation with Wat Tyler's revolt

& STRIFE



THE BIG DEBATE

Was Edward II **re**



In 2005, the bestselling historian **Ian Mortimer** caused a storm when he argued that Edward II had not been assassinated at Berkeley Castle in 1327 – received wisdom for almost 700 years – and was still alive in 1330. His theory has attracted numerous critics, among them the medieval academic **Nicholas Vincent**. Here the two put forward their conflicting views on the fate of an English king

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JO BRADFORD AND AJ LEVY

“

The lie that Edward II was dead was **a political convenience** welcomed by those who trusted his son, Edward III

IAN MORTIMER

If there's one point most historians agree on, it's that Edward II was one of medieval England's least capable rulers. He is chiefly remembered for squandering the military gains made by his father Edward I in Scotland (notably by losing the battle of Bannockburn) and alienating his wife and barons by promoting personal favourites such as Hugh Despenser the Younger.

But how did Edward die? We know that Queen Isabella's patience with her husband snapped in 1326, and that she invaded England with her lover, Roger Mortimer, who was living in exile in France. Edward was forced to abdicate and was then imprisoned at Berkeley Castle, where he was murdered on 21 September 1327 (with, as legend would have it, the assistance of a red-hot poker).

That, at least, has been the accepted view of events for centuries. Yet, in 2005, Ian Mortimer challenged the consensus by arguing – in the journal *The English Historical Review* – that Edward had cheated death and was still alive in 1330. Mortimer's theory has sparked a lively debate in the historical community, as the following exchange demonstrates...

JO BRADFORD

ally murdered?



The alabaster effigy on the tomb of Edward II at Gloucester Cathedral

Ian Mortimer: How can we be sure whether Edward II did or did not die in Berkeley Castle? The answer is not a straightforward: ‘because this document says so’ – after all, any single piece of evidence could be wrong. Making the case that he did not is, rather, a matter of showing first that the evidence for the death, which we have hitherto accepted, is fundamentally flawed; and second that there are multiple independent accounts from people who knew him, stating that Edward was alive at a later date.

According to the royal accounts, Edward II died in Berkeley Castle on 21 September 1327. Lord Berkeley’s accounts show that the news was taken in his own letters to the royal household, which was then at Lincoln. An extant letter written at Lincoln by Edward III on 24 September states that news of his father’s death had been received during the previous night. It was therefore accepted in the royal household *and circulated* from 24 September.

Additionally, one chronicle specifies that members attending the parliament at Lincoln (which finished on 23 September) were told the news as they dispersed. As Lincoln is over 150 miles (240km) from Berkeley, no check on the veracity of the death was possible before it was circulated and preparations for a royal funeral began. The body itself was embalmed and completely covered in cerecloth (waxed fabric used for wrapping corpses) before it was shown publicly, and exhibited only superficially.

So the evidence that led everyone to believe Edward II was dead at that time – and which was widely held as fact until 2005 – depends entirely on that initial message from Lord Berkeley. However, Lord Berkeley admitted in parliament three years later (in November 1330) that he had not previously heard about Edward’s death. We can therefore have no

confidence in the reliability of his original message. If he did not know about the death of the ex-king in his custody, how could he have faithfully reported it?

Given that the hundreds of documents attesting to the death are based on this one unreliable message, it behoves us to consider the evidence for possible alternative events, including testimonies of his survival. There are multiple items to consider.

First, there is Lord Berkeley’s own testimony, which implies that the king could still have been alive in 1330. Second, an original letter from the highly regarded archbishop of York states that the latter had received “certain news” that Edward was still alive in January 1330, and the archbishop consequently made efforts to rescue him.

Third, Lord Pecche took part in a plot to free Edward from Corfe Castle in Dorset in 1330. This is significant because Lord Pecche



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I disagree that the evidence is ‘**fundamentally flawed**’ or that it points inexorably towards Edward II’s survival

NICHOLAS VINCENT

had been in charge of that castle from 1325 to 1329, so had the means to ascertain whether or not Edward II was being held there. Fourth, the Earl of Kent, Edward II's respected half-brother, was sentenced to death in parliament for trying to rescue Edward from Corfe Castle and make him king again in March 1330.

Fifth, there is an extant copy of a letter written by the secretary of Luca Fieschi, a friend of Edward II, who claimed to have met him in the disguise of a pilgrim at the papal court in 1331. This letter gave a detailed version of Edward's account, telling how he had been taken by his gaoler from Berkeley to Corfe Castle, then sent to Ireland and only released after the fall of Roger Mortimer, the man who dethroned him. There are at least three other information streams that attest to Edward's survival after 1330.

These points should be seen in the context of a huge number of otherwise inexplicable circumstantial details that historians have traditionally ignored, such as Edward III's failure to prosecute Sir John Maltravers for failing in his duty to keep Edward II safely when he was in his care. Taken together, they strongly suggest that Edward III's maintenance of the lie that his father was dead was a political convenience – one welcomed by everyone who trusted the young king and feared the renewal of the unrest brought about by Edward II during his disastrous reign.

Nicholas Vincent: Ian Mortimer makes the case that we should suspend disbelief and allow that evidence points to the survival of Edward II beyond the supposed date of his death, in September 1327. I agree that the evidence here requires careful consideration. I disagree that it is “fundamentally flawed” or that it points inexorably towards the king's survival.

To disprove a negation is never an easy task. Nonetheless, consider the following. All of the main political actors at the time behaved, after September 1327, as if the king were dead. There was a public funeral at Gloucester. When in 1330 Lord Berkeley denied any knowledge of Edward II's death, he was on trial for his life, desperate to prove that he had been absent from Berkeley. He did not deny that others had carried out the deed.

As late as 1330, the archbishop of York, Sir John Pecche and Edward II's half-brother, Edmund of Woodstock, may all have hoped (or feared) that Edward might still be alive. Edmund was executed for a deluded attempt to free the late king from captivity at Corfe – but Edmund had many enemies.

In 1322 Edmund had played a leading role in the execution of his cousin, Thomas of Lancaster, and in the following year had seized back Berkeley Castle for the king. After 1326 his alliance with the new regime was never secure, and his trial and execution were very much acts of political vengeance. It is surely significant that even the public executioner, believing that Edmund was too naive to merit death, refused to behead him – he was kept waiting for a whole day until at last a common criminal was found who was prepared to wield the axe. Indeed, Roger Mortimer, when tried later that year on the charge of assuming royal power, was accused of deliberately duping Edmund into the belief that the late king still lived.

As for the Fieschi letter, or Edward III's later meetings with a ‘hermit’ who claimed

to be his father, these fit all too neatly into a wider pattern. Throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, the legend of the hidden or undying king remained a powerful one – in political reality, not just in the legends of Arthur, Charlemagne or Frederick Barbarossa. King Harold, it was rumoured, had not been killed at Hastings but lived on as a hermit outside Chester into the 1180s (by which time he would have been more than 160 years old). The German emperor Henry V, far from dying in 1125, was likewise rumoured to have lived on as a hermit.

As with Edward II after 1327, there were sound political reasons to encourage such rumours, not least to discredit the dynasties that had thereafter ‘usurped’ the succession. Count Baldwin of Flanders, Latin emperor of Constantinople, disappeared into Greek captivity in 1205, assumed dead. The regency government that he left behind had little incentive to confirm his demise; hence, as late as 1225, when a man appeared in Flanders claiming to be the real Baldwin, many were prepared to believe him. He led a revolt against the real Baldwin's daughter, until the following year when he was unmasked as a Burgundian pretender and executed.

In the Middle Ages, rumour was a powerful weapon. In 1263 Edward II's grandfather, King Henry III of England, was rumoured to have died. So keen were various people to credit this that the annalist of Tewkesbury Abbey in Gloucestershire inserted it as a certain fact in his chronicle, penning a rhyming obituary notice. In fact, Henry did not die until 1272.

As for the ‘hermit’ claiming to be Edward II, whom Edward III is said to have met many years later in Flanders, consider this: I live for much of the year in Paris, where one of our neighbourhood beggars regularly declares himself king of Poland. Rather than denounce him as a pretender, or insist that he share the fate of Lambert Simnel or Perkin Warbeck (both imposters who challenged Henry VII in his claim to the throne), I greet him with a friendly wave and a murmured “Your Majesty”. Perkin Warbeck, it may be remembered, was executed in 1499 only after strenuous attempts to tolerate his mythomania. Lambert Simnel, having dropped all pretence, was allowed to live out his life as a minor court servant. He died in c1530, four decades after his coronation in 1487 in Dublin (the only English coronation ever held there) as ‘King Edward VI’.

Ian Mortimer: This argument is not about ‘suspending disbelief’ – it is about hard information. It is not about what happened

“
The sole source
for the public
announcement
and chroniclers’
statements was
a **self-confessed
lie** from Lord
Berkeley

IAN MORTIMER





LEFT: The room at Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire, in which Edward II was imprisoned – and in which he may have died in 1327

that Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare. Proponents select the circumstantial evidence that best tallies with their preferred belief, and they ignore the testimonies of those contemporaries whose information was obtained at first hand. Every historian should resist such methods, even if doing so challenges a long-accepted orthodoxy.

It's a great shame that here we have a senior academic dismissing a scholarly reappraisal of the inconsistent contemporary evidence. He does this even though the said reappraisal has gone through a peer-review process and been published by *The English Historical Review*.

Nicholas Vincent: Ian Mortimer demands that I ask myself why I think that Edward II died in 1327. I think that Edward died because people at the time declared this to be so. They also behaved as if it were so. For much the same reasons, I believe that Barack Obama is president of the US and that water flows downhill. I regard the evidence of Edward's survival to be unreliable, and I believe (foolishly, according to Mortimer; prudently in my reckoning) that this survival story fits in to a wider pattern of such stories that extends across the Middle Ages and into more recent times.

In my opinion, it has not been proved that Edward II cheated death in 1327 any more than Elvis Presley can be proved to be alive and well and living in Hemel Hempstead. Many people believe that Elvis still lives. Ian Mortimer believes that Edward II did not die at Berkeley Castle. In both cases, a passionate belief is founded upon evidence that unbelievers consider implausible. I remain an unbeliever. **H**

Dr Ian Mortimer is the author of numerous history books and a fellow of both the Royal Historical Society and the Society of Antiquaries

Nicholas Vincent is professor of medieval history at the University of East Anglia

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

► **Medieval Intrigue** by Ian Mortimer (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2010) includes the peer-reviewed paper on Edward II mentioned in this article

► **A Brief History of Britain 1066–1485** by Nicholas Vincent (Robinson, 2011) covers the reign and ousting of Edward II

to Baldwin of Flanders or Perkin Warbeck – or any other postmortem royal claimant. It is about what happened to Edward II in 1327. One cannot use the cases of 13th- and 15th-century pretenders as evidence for the events of 1327 – that is reductionism. It is like saying: “These cats look grey, therefore all cats are grey.” Nor should we rely on circumstantial evidence when we have direct evidence for how the story of the death came to be circulated.

The key thing that Professor Vincent should appreciate is why *he* thinks Edward II died in 1327. He relies on the fact that “all the main political actors in 1327 behaved... as if the king were dead”. But why did those political actors behave in that way? Because they had been told Edward was dead by the royal household at Lincoln on 24 September. Their behaviour is therefore merely circumstantial evidence: they weren't at Berkeley themselves.

Why did the royal household believe Edward was dead? Because Lord Berkeley had sent them news to that effect. As I have explained, the dates of sending and receipt of information prove that there was no check on this news – and, three years later, the sender himself stated he had not heard about the death. The entire edifice of evidence that Professor Vincent trusts was thus founded on a self-confessed lie.

The important aspect is the methodology. The traditional methodology is basically the same as that employed by those who maintain

“
It has not been
proved that
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NICHOLAS VINCENT

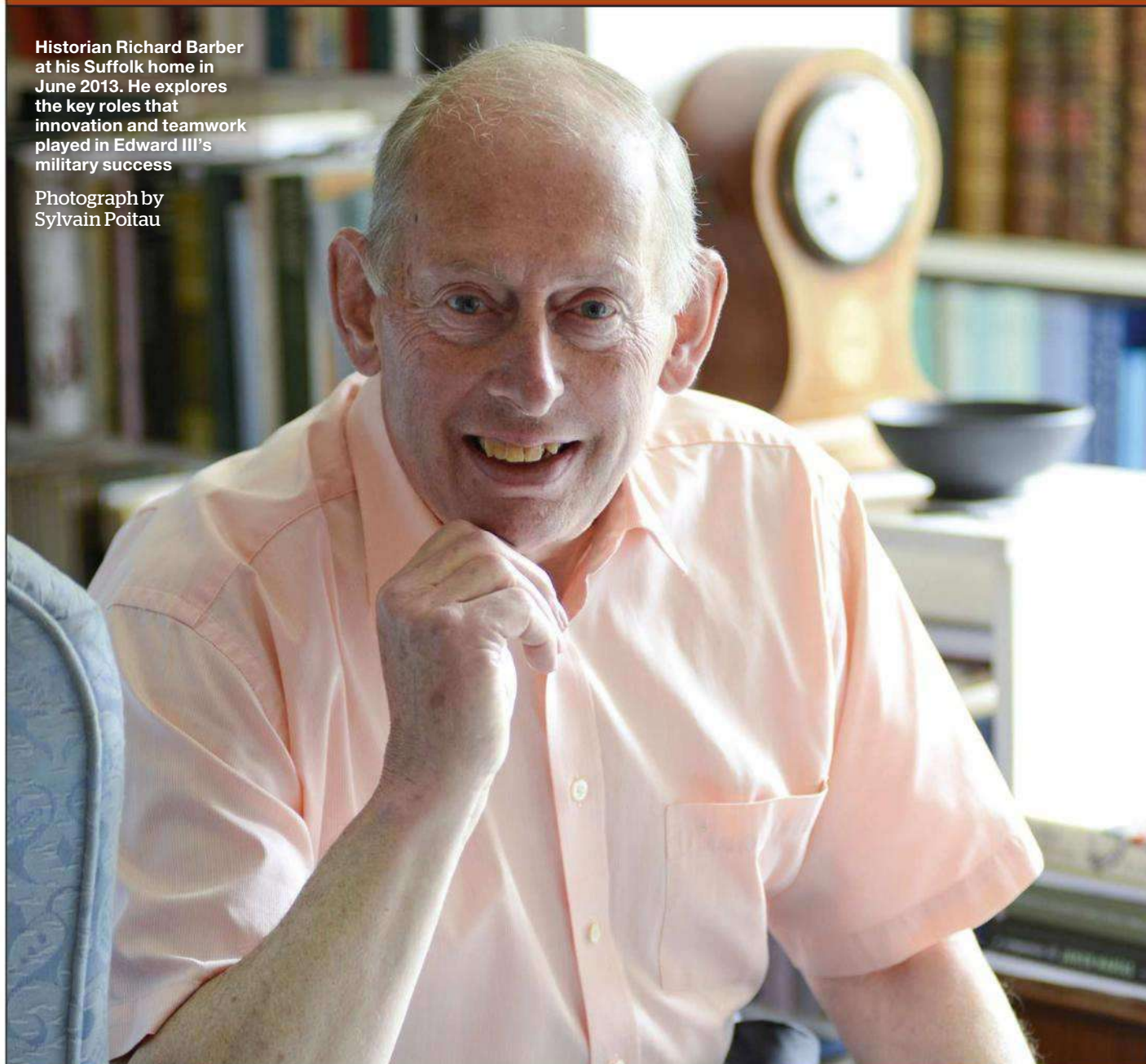


Military innovations of Edward III

INTERVIEW

Historian Richard Barber at his Suffolk home in June 2013. He explores the key roles that innovation and teamwork played in Edward III's military success

Photograph by
Sylvain Poitou



INTERVIEW / RICHARD BARBER

“Edward was using tactics and weapons never before seen on a battlefield”

*In 1346 Edward III led his forces to a crucial victory over a much larger French army at the battle of Crécy – but how? Historian Richard Barber spoke to **Matt Elton** about the king's strengths as a ruler and a strategist, and the reasons why he struggled later in his reign*

SYLVAIN POITOU

RICHARD BARBER

Born in 1941, Barber is a member of both the Royal Historical Society and the Royal Society of Literature, and founder of The Boydell Press. He has written widely on medieval history; his books include *Edward III and the Triumph of England* (2013) – discussed in this interview – *The Knight and Chivalry* (1970) and *The Holy Grail: The History of a Legend* (2004). He is honorary visiting professor in the department of history at the University of York

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INTERVIEW**
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Did a sense of Edward's personality emerge early in his reign?

It began to, yes, but really what's more interesting was the group of people around him and the way in which he interacted with them. What emerged fairly rapidly – and this is a recurring theme throughout my book about Edward – is that his great strength was that he didn't interact with people in the way that Edward II and Richard II did – which was to say: "I am the king". Edward was very much one of a group. He was first among equals, certainly at this stage in his reign.

Would you say that, in battle, he was stronger as a fighter or a strategist?

He was actually quite an all-rounder, and he was clearly a thinker who was well advised and took advice. I think that was possibly one of the key things about Edward. Whether it was about the reform of the law or what to do next in the middle of the battle, he didn't say: "I know what to do" – instead, he set the agenda but then let other people work on it, too, and took advice.

It was only in relation to parliament that he sometimes refused to take advice, because it was not an organised body and was quite difficult to deal with. But his great strength really was this business of acting together with people rather than going off on his own trail.

Moving ahead to the battle of Crécy, what kinds of tactics were used?

The important thing about Crécy is that Edward was clearly, in my view, using tactics and weapons that had never before been seen on a battlefield. Evidence has come to light that indicates that Edward was actually fighting from inside a ring of carts. He was using archers – which, in terms of continental warfare, were completely new – and he was using guns, which were also completely new. He constructed a ring of carts in open country – there was nowhere that was suitable on the battlefield for the English technique of getting a defensive position with a narrow approach that archers could cover, so he created it. This is doubtless going to be argued about, but at least I've put it on the table for other people to knock it down!

What allowed him to use all of these new innovations at the same time?

Edward was interested in new technology: he had one of the first public clocks in England at Windsor, and he liked new technology and new things. The archers were an innovation in terms of continental warfare but were something that the English had particularly developed.

The other thing is that Edward was very good at improvising. The ring of carts was an improvisation in response to a situation, using something that was known about – you can trace this idea of a ring of carts back to barbarian attacks on the Romans in the eighth century – but ringing them together so that the enemy couldn't break in, and the way that he used them to place the archers, that shows that he's someone who can think and improvise. It may have been one of his knights who suggested it, of course, but he was open to this kind of suggestion.

What do we know about the Company of the Garter, which Edward founded?

This is rather sweeping, but nobody ever seems to have actually read the statutes before writing about the subject! There's one military clause, which says you've got to be a respectable knight, but it's very vaguely phrased and is rather like saying that you've got to be a gentleman before you can be admitted to a club.

There's nothing that says that they would hold a tournament every year on Saint George's Day – they didn't. There was one at the very beginning, and one that happens to coincide with Saint George's Day, but that's all the evidence for regular tournaments, so it's not a chivalric order of knighthood. What the statutes are is a great table detailing how many masses an earl or a knight has to pay for to honour a deceased companion. So it's an absolutely straight religious fraternity, like a guild of knights.

How important were tournaments as a social and political tool?

I think because of Edward's own interests, they were extremely important. At one level they were a bit like playing golf today: a tournament was where you met and talked to people socially. But they had

other real advantages: they taught people how to work and fight together as a team.

What caused the downturn in Edward's fortunes later in his reign?

I think his political strategy was quite limited. He didn't understand how to win over the natives, so to speak. He never managed to hold the people that came over to the English side, or he got the ones who were pretty devious anyway, such as Robert of Artois, who were more of a nuisance than they were worth. So he ended up with a successful English invasion of France but no French base and no French clientele, and he never managed to build it up.

So Edward's political strategy was flawed only in that he hadn't been able to solve something that very few people had: how to conquer a country that was basically, root and branch, hostile – and was also hostile because they didn't particularly like the idea, irrespective of nationality, of someone ruling them when they were used to being ruled with a pretty light rein.

In your book about Edward you write a lot about sources. How difficult is it to research this period?

This is what I tried to show by asking how we know what we know. I don't think anyone's quite set it out in this way before, but it is absolutely basic to our understanding of medieval history. Some very intelligent chroniclers really thought about what they were doing; they didn't just put down what they heard. An author called Gilles Li Muisis wrote a wonderful passage about how, when you're in the middle of battle, you really don't have a clue what's going on. It's hugely useful to have somebody who was trying, within 10 years of events, to assess what happened.

Do you hope your book might change our understanding of Edward?

I wouldn't claim to make anybody change their understanding, but what I hope they *would* do is go away and look at it again and show me where I'm wrong! **H**

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

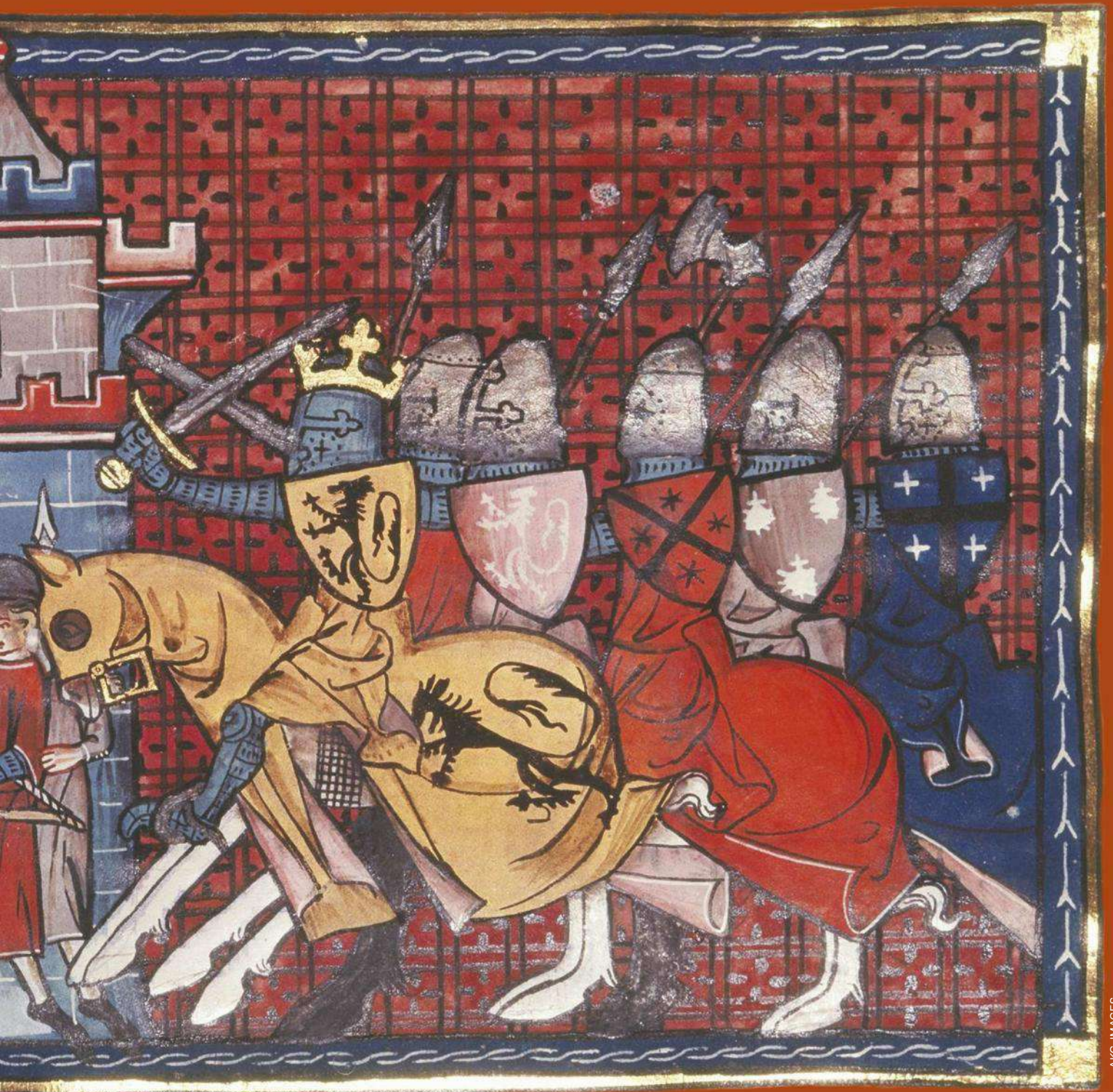
► *Edward III and the Triumph of England* by Richard Barber (Allen Lane, 2013)

Richard the Lionheart (right) demonstrated his military acumen during clashes with the French king Philip Augustus at the key strategic stronghold of Gisors in the 1190s



LIONHEART

Richard I knew the business of war from his early experience in the English king honed his military genius. On his return to the west,



AKG-IMAGES

KING OF WAR

France. But, says **Thomas Asbridge**, it was in the Third Crusade that Richard proved himself the best commander of his generation

On 25 March 1194 King Richard I, the Lionheart, laid siege to Nottingham Castle. Intent upon reasserting his authority over England, the king directed the full force of his military genius and martial resources against this supposedly impregnable, rebel-held fortress.

Eleven days earlier, Richard had landed at Sandwich in Kent, setting foot on English soil for the first time in more than four years. During his prolonged absence – first waging a gruelling crusade in the Holy Land, then enduring imprisonment at the hands of political rivals in Austria and Germany – the Lionheart's devious younger brother, John, had sought to seize power. Richard thus returned to a realm threatened by insurrection and, though John himself soon scuttled across the Channel, Nottingham remained an outpost of those championing his dubious cause.

King Richard I fell upon the stronghold with chilling efficiency. He arrived at the head of a sizeable military force, and possessed the requisite tools to crack Nottingham's stout defences, having summoned siege machines and stone-throwing trebuchets from Leicester, 22 carpenters from Northampton, and his master engineer, Urric, from London. The castle's garrison offered stern resistance, but on the first day of fighting the outer battlements fell. As had become his custom, Richard threw himself into the fray wearing only light mail armour and an iron cap, but was protected from a rain of arrows and crossbow bolts by a number of heavy shields borne by his bodyguards. By evening, we are told, many of the defenders were left "wounded and crushed" and a number of prisoners had been taken.

Having made a clear statement of intent, the Lionheart sent messengers to the garrison in the morning, instructing them to capitulate to their rightful king. At first they refused, apparently unconvinced that Richard had indeed returned. In response, the Lionheart deployed his trebuchets, then ordered gibbets to be raised and hanged a number of his captives in full sight of the fortress. Surrender followed shortly thereafter. Accounts vary as to the treatment subsequently meted out to the rebels: one chronicler maintained that they were spared by the "compassionate" king because he was "so gentle and full of mercy", but other sources make it clear that at least two of John's hated lackeys met their deaths soon after (one being imprisoned and starved, the other flayed alive).



Richard I and Philip Augustus lead the siege of Acre (1189–91). Of the two men, the English monarch learned more from his experiences during the Third Crusade

With this victory Richard reaffirmed the potent legitimacy of his kingship, and support for John's cause in England collapsed. The work of repairing the damage inflicted by John's machinations upon his family's extensive continental lands would take years – the majority of Richard's remaining life, in fact – but the Lionhearted monarch had returned to the west in spectacular fashion. Few could doubt that he was now the warrior-king par excellence – a fearsome opponent, unrivalled among the crowned monarchs of Europe.

Rex bellicosus

Richard I's skills as a warrior and a general have long been recognised. For much of the 20th century it was his supposedly intemperate and bloodthirsty brutality that was emphasised, with one scholar describing him as a "peerless killing machine", but in recent decades a strong case has been made for the Lionheart's more clinical mastery of the science of medieval warfare. Today he is often portrayed as England's 'rex bellicosus' (warlike king).

Current assessments of Richard's military achievements generally present his early

years as Duke of Aquitaine (from 1172) as the decisive and formative phase in his development as a commander. Having acquired and honed his skills, it is argued, the Lionheart was perfectly placed to make his mark on the Third Crusade, waging a holy war to recover Palestine from the Muslim sultan Saladin. The contest between these two titans of medieval history for control of Jerusalem is presented as the high point of Richard I's martial career – the moment at which he forged his legend.

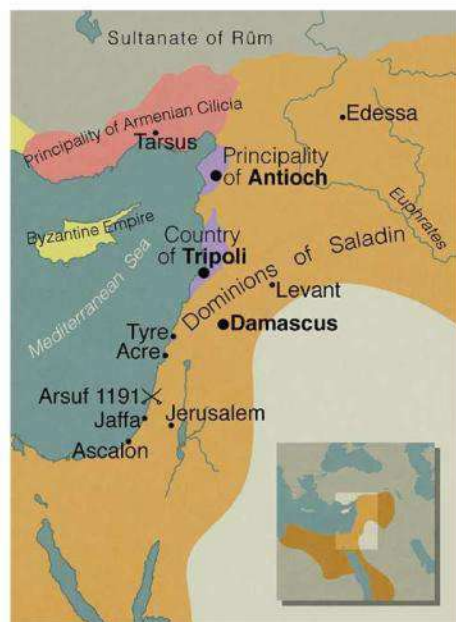
However, this approach understates some issues and overplays others. Richard embarked upon the crusade on 4 July 1190 as a recently crowned and relatively untested king. Years of intermittent campaigning had given him a solid grounding in the business of war – particularly in the gritty realities of raiding and siege-craft – but to begin with, at least, no one would have expected Richard to lead in the holy war. That role fell to Emperor Frederick Barbarossa of Germany, Europe's elder statesmen and veteran campaigner, and it was only Barbarossa's unfortunate death through drowning en route to the Levant that opened the door for the Lionheart.

Arguably, the extent and significance of Richard's achievements in the Holy Land have also been exaggerated. True, he brought the crusader siege of Acre to a swift and successful conclusion in July 1191, but he did so only in alliance with his sometime-rival King Philip Augustus of France (of the Capetian dynasty). The victory over Saladin's forces later that year at the battle of Arsuf, on 7 September, appears on closer inspection to have been an unplanned and inconclusive encounter, while Richard's decision to twice advance to within 12 miles of Jerusalem (only to retreat on both occasions without mounting an assault) suggests that he had failed to grasp, much less harness, the distinctive devotional impulse that drove crusading armies.

This is not to suggest that Richard's expedition should be regarded as a failure, nor to deny that his campaign was punctuated by moments of inspired generalship – most notably in leading his army on a fighting march through Muslim-held territory between Acre and Jaffa. Rather, it is to point out that the Lionheart was still sharpening his skills in Palestine. The Third Crusade ended in stalemate in September 1192, but it was in the fires of this holy war, as Richard and Saladin fought one another to a standstill, that the English king tempered his martial genius.

He returned to the west having acquired a new depth of experience and insight, and proved only too capable of putting the lessons learned in the Levant to good use as he strove first to subdue England and then to reclaim the likes of Normandy and Anjou

The near east on the eve of the Third Crusade



from Philip of France. It is this period, between 1194 and 1198, that rightly should be recognised as the pinnacle of Richard I's military career.

By the time he reached England in March 1194, the 36-year-old Richard had matured into an exceptionally well-rounded commander. As a meticulous logician and a cool-headed, visionary strategist the Lionheart could out-think his enemy but he also loved frontline combat and possessed an exuberant self-confidence and inspirational charisma, allied to a grim, but arguably necessary, streak of ruthlessness.

All of these qualities were immediately apparent when Richard marched on rebel-held Nottingham. This veteran of the siege of Acre – one of the hardest-fought investments of the Middle Ages – understood the value of careful planning, the decisive capability of heavy siege machinery and the morale-sapping impact of calculated violence. Though one contemporary claimed Nottingham Castle was “so well fortified by nature and artifice” that it seemed “unconquerable”, Richard brought its garrison to the point of surrender in less than two days. Other striking successes in siege warfare followed, not least when the Lionheart captured the mighty fortress of Loches (in Touraine) in just three hours through a blistering frontal assault.

Sparring with the enemy

While campaigning on the continent to recover Angevin territory from Philip Augustus, Richard also demonstrated a remarkably acute appreciation of the precepts governing military manoeuvres and engagements. During the crusade he had sparred with Saladin's forces on numerous occasions, through fighting marches, exploratory raids and in the course of the first, incremental advance inland towards Jerusalem conducted in the autumn of 1191.

This hard-won familiarity with the subtleties of troop movements and martial incursion served the Lionheart well when, in the early summer of 1194, Philip Augustus advanced west towards the town of Vendôme (on the border between the Angevin realm and Capetian territory) and began to threaten the whole of the Loire Valley.

Richard responded by marching into the region in early July. Vendôme itself was not fortified, so the Angevin king threw up a defensive camp in front of the town. The two armies, seemingly well-matched in numerical terms, were now separated by only a matter of miles. Though Philip initially remained blissfully unaware, from the moment that the Lionheart took up



The seal of Richard the Lionheart depicts the ultimate medieval warrior-king who eagerly threw himself into the heat of battle

As a meticulous logician and a visionary strategist
the Lionheart could out-think his enemy but he also loved frontline combat

a position before Vendôme, the Capetians (French) were in grave danger. Should the French king attempt to initiate a frontal assault on the Angevin encampment, he would have to lead his troops south-west down the road to Vendôme, leaving the Capetian host exposed to flanking and encircling manoeuvres. However, any move by the French to retreat from the frontline would be an equally risky proposition, because they would be prone to attack from the rear and might easily be routed.

At first King Philip sought to intimidate Richard, dispatching an envoy on 3 July to warn that a French offensive would soon be launched. Displaying a disconcerting confidence, the Lionheart apparently replied that he would happily await the Capetians' arrival, adding that, should they not appear, he would pay them a visit in the morning. Unsettled by this brazen retort, Philip wavered over his next step.

When the Angevins initiated an advance the following day, the French king's nerve broke and he ordered a hurried withdrawal

CRUSADER TO WAR KING

8 September 1157

Richard is born, son of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine (right), founders of the Angevin dynasty



June 1172

Invested as Duke of Aquitaine in the abbey church of St Hilary in Poitiers

11 June 1183

His elder brother dies. Richard becomes heir to the English crown and Angevin realm (including Normandy and Anjou)

Autumn 1187

Saladin reconquers Jerusalem. Richard is the first nobleman north of the Alps to take the cross for the Third Crusade

3 September 1189

Having rebelled against his father's authority and hounded the old king to his death, Richard is crowned king

4 July 1190

Sets out on crusade to the Holy Land, leaving younger brother John in Europe

Summer 1191

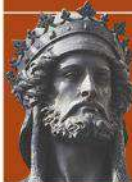
Richard seizes Acre from Saladin's forces. He marches to Jaffa, defeating the Muslim army at Arsuf en route

2 September 1192

After abortive attempts on Jerusalem, Richard agrees peace with Saladin

December 1192

Travelling home, Richard is seized by Leopold of Austria, then held by Henry VI of Germany until 1194



26 March 1194

Richard (shown in a Victorian statue) takes Nottingham Castle. His brother John's cause in England collapses

1196-98

Richard spends £12,000 on 'Chateau Gaillard', which helps him reassert Angevin dominance in northern France

6 April 1199

Richard dies during the siege of Chalus



north-east along the road to Fréteval (12 miles from Vendôme).

Though eager to harry his fleeing opponent, Richard shrewdly recognised that he could ill afford a headlong pursuit that might leave his own troops in disarray, perilously exposed to counterattack. The Lionheart therefore placed one of his most trusted field lieutenants, William Marshal, in command of a reserve force, with orders to shadow the main advance yet hold back from the hunt itself and thus be ready to counter any lingering Capetian resistance.

Rout of the French

Having readied his men, Richard began his chase around midday on 4 July. Towards dusk, Richard caught up with the French rear guard and wagon train near Fréteval and, as the Angevins fell on the broken Capetian ranks, hundreds of enemy troops were slain or taken prisoner. All manner of plunder was seized, from "pavilions, all kinds of tents, cloth of scarlet and silk, plate and coin" according to one chronicler, to "horses, palfreys, pack-horses, sumptuous garments and money". Many of Philip Augustus's personal possessions were appropriated, including a portion of the Capetian royal archives.

It was a desperately humiliating defeat. Richard hunted the fleeing French king through the night, using a string of horses to speed his pursuit, but when Philip pulled off the road to hide in a small church, Richard

The contested border zone between Normandy and French lands



AKG-IMAGES/GETTY; MAP ILLUSTRATION: MARTIN SANDERS - MAPART.CO.UK



the Vexin. First, he built a vast new military complex on the Seine at Les Andelys (on the Vexin's western edge) that included a fortified island, a dock that made the site accessible to shipping from England and a looming fortress christened 'Chateau Gaillard' – the 'Castle of Impudence' or 'Cheeky Castle'. Built in just two years (1196–98), the project cost an incredible £12,000 – far more than Richard spent on fortifications in all of England over the course of his entire reign.

Les Andelys protected the approaches to the ducal capital of Rouen and, more importantly, provided a staging post for offensive incursions into the Vexin. For the first time it allowed large numbers of Angevin troops to be billeted on the fringe of this border zone in relative safety, and the Lionheart set about using these forces to dominate the surrounding region. Though the Capetians retained control of Gisors and a number of other strongholds in the Vexin, their emasculated garrisons were virtually unable to venture beyond their gates because the Angevins based at Les Andelys were constantly ranging across the landscape.

One chronicler observed that the French were "so pinned down [in their] castles that they could not take anything outside", and troops in Gisors itself were unable even to draw water from their local spring. By these steps King Richard reaffirmed Angevin dominance in northern France, shifting the balance of power back in his favour.

In the end, Richard's penchant for siege warfare and frontline skirmishing cost him his life. One of the greatest warrior-kings of the Middle Ages was cut down in 1199 by a crossbow bolt while investing an insignificant Aquitanian fortress. The Lionheart's death, aged just 41, seemed to contemporaries, as it does today, a shocking and pointless waste. Nonetheless, he was the foremost military commander of his generation – a rex bellicosus whose martial gifts were refined in the Holy Land. **II**

Thomas Asbridge is reader in medieval history at Queen Mary, University of London, and author of *The Crusades: The War for the Holy Land* (Simon & Schuster, 2010)

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **The Reign of Richard Lionheart** by Ralph V Turner and Richard R Heiser (Routledge, 2000)
- **Richard I** by John Gillingham (Yale, 1999)
- **The Greatest Knight: The Remarkable Life of William Marshal, the Power Behind Five English Thrones** by Thomas Asbridge (Simon & Schuster, 2015)

Richard was the **foremost military commander of his generation** – a rex bellicosus whose martial gifts were refined in the Holy Land

rode by. It was a shockingly narrow escape for the Capetian. The Angevins returned to Vendôme near midnight, laden with booty and leading a long line of prisoners.

By the end of 1198, after long years of tireless campaigning and adept diplomacy, Richard had recovered most of the Angevin dynasty's territorial holdings on the continent. One crucial step in the process of restoration was the battle for dominion over the Norman Vexin – the long-contested border zone between the duchy of Normandy and the Capetian-held île-de-France. Philip Augustus had seized this region in 1193–94 (while Richard remained in captivity), occupying a number of castles including the stronghold at Gisors. Long regarded as the linchpin of the entire Vexin, this fortress was all but impregnable. It boasted a fearsome inner keep enclosed within an imposing circuit of outer battlements and, even more importantly, could rely upon

swift reinforcement by French troops should it ever be subjected to enemy assault.

The Lionheart was uniquely qualified to attempt the reconquest of the Vexin. In the Holy Land he had painstakingly developed a line of defensible fortifications along the route linking Jaffa and Jerusalem. Later, he dedicated himself to re-establishing the battlements at Ascalon because the port was critical to the balance of power between Palestine and Egypt. Richard might already have possessed a fairly shrewd appreciation of a castle's use and value before the crusade, but by the time he returned to Europe there can have been few commanders with a better grasp of this dimension of medieval warfare.

Drawing upon this expertise, Richard immediately recognised that, in practical terms, Gisors was invulnerable to direct attack. As a result he formulated an inspired two-fold strategy, designed to neutralise Gisors and reassert Angevin influence over

THE **HISTORY** ESSAY



Henry II's knights hack Thomas Becket to death in Canterbury Cathedral in this 15th-century painting. The two most powerful men in England had once seemed inseparable but by 1170 their relationship had come to be defined by "intransigence and rage"

THE UNHOLY FEUD THAT KILLED THOMAS BECKET

Henry II and Becket may have wrestled over the power of the church, but their murderous dispute was chiefly fuelled by a clash of personalities

By Richard Barber

BRIDGEMAN

At dusk on the evening of 29 December 1170, the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, was murdered in the half-light of his cathedral by four knights. They had arrived in the afternoon at the archbishop's lodging, claiming to bear a message from King Henry II. A violent argument soon

broke out, and Thomas took refuge in the church. He resolutely resisted the knights' demand that he should become their prisoner. In response, they attempted to haul him out of the church and, in the struggle that ensued, drew their swords. The first blow wounded Thomas on the head, and then, as the blood streamed down his face, one of the knights, Richard Brito, "smote him with such force that the sword was broken against his head", and the whole crown of his head was cut off. One of the knight's followers used his sword point to extract the archbishop's brains through the wound. It was a horrific crime in itself – but, given the status of the victim and the sanctity of the place, it was an outrage beyond comprehension.

The attack was the conclusion of a long struggle between king and archbishop, one that was marked almost from the beginning by a clash of personalities. Great issues were at stake. Henry II was a remarkable and intelligent ruler who had a vision of a land in which justice should be available to all, and all should be equal under royal law. As a young man he had witnessed the disastrous struggle for the throne between his cousin Stephen and his mother, Matilda, and was determined that good government should be restored.

Thomas had his own vision, believing that in all things the authority of the church should be supreme, and that the king should rule as the church's representative in the secular world. Royal interference in the church's affairs should be ended, he contested, after centuries in which the king could overawe those who elected the church's leaders, even the cardinals who chose the pope himself.

Both believed passionately in laws: Henry in the laws of the realm, Thomas in those of the church – canon law – which had been newly compiled and edited at the university of Bologna.

Yet this infamous struggle between two powerful men began in harmony and friendship. Henry II became king at the end of 1154 when he was only 21, after the sudden death of Stephen. His chief advisor at the outset of his reign was Theobald, archbishop of Canterbury, and it was Theobald who arranged the appointment of a 35-year-old clerk in his service to be the king's chancellor, effectively his chief

clerk. This was Thomas Becket, son of a moderately wealthy Londoner, who had joined Theobald's household 12 years earlier as a first step to a career in the church. He had become Theobald's favourite, and had been sent to Bologna and Auxerre to study canon law before becoming archdeacon of Canterbury. Thomas was charming, quick-witted and a loyal servant.

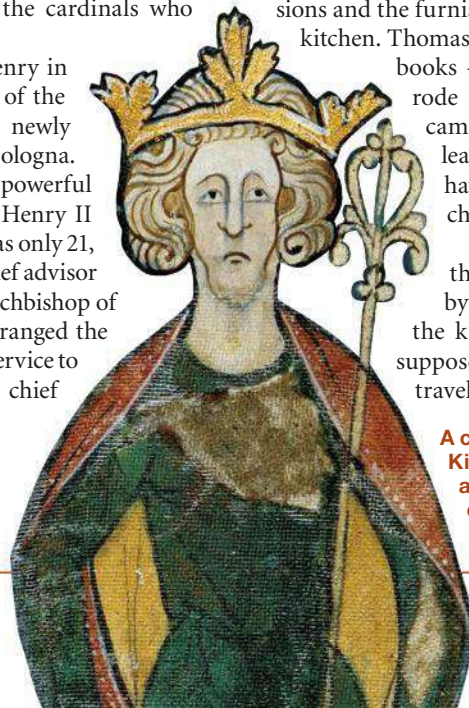
Having spent his early years in the very secular environment of the merchant families of London, Thomas transferred easily to royal service and the royal court. But what no one could have foreseen was the extraordinary friendship that sprang up between Henry and the chancellor, and the way in which Thomas transformed his rather prosaic post – at least in outward appearance – into the greatest office under the crown.

Henry never enjoyed magnificence, and preferred, even on festive or ceremonial occasions, to dress as simply as possible. When an alliance with France had to be negotiated – to be sealed by the betrothal of Henry's eldest son, also called Henry, to Margaret, the daughter of Louis VII – the king sent Thomas on ahead to deal with the business aspects of the alliance.

Mindful of the need to impress the French, the king also encouraged him to mount a magnificent display. To say that Thomas was up to the task is something of an understatement. For a start, he took 24 changes of clothing, many silk garments (which he gave away), every kind of fur, cloaks, and rich carpets. When he entered France he was preceded by 250 footmen, who sang as they marched along. Eight wagons followed, bearing his provisions and the furnishings for his chapel, chamber, bedroom and kitchen. Thomas's treasure – gold and silver plate, money and books – was carried on 12 pack-horses. Monkeys

rode on the back of the carthorses. Behind this came the squires with their masters' shields, and leading their warhorses, the falconers with hawks on their wrists, and the members of the chancellor's household.

Finally, preceded by the knights and clerics, the chancellor himself appeared, accompanied by close friends. "What a marvellous man the king of England must be," the French were supposed to have exclaimed, "if his chancellor travels in such great state!" As it turned out, King



A c1280–1300 book painting shows King Henry II, "a remarkable and intelligent ruler... prone to disastrous outbursts of temper"

THE **HISTORY** ESSAY

Even if the details are exaggerated, Thomas's sudden change from a great officer of state with appropriate secular pomp to ascetic archbishop has puzzled historians ever since

Henry came modestly dressed and accompanied by a mere handful of knights.

The king often teased Thomas about his delight in rich dress. As they rode through London one day, Henry saw an old man in a ragged coat and suggested to his chancellor that it would be an act of charity to give him a cloak. "Yes," said Thomas, "you, as king, should see to it." At this, Henry took hold of Thomas's splendid cape and, after a short tussle, pulled it off and gave it to the poor man.

The cleric William Fitzstephen wrote that "when the daily round of business had been dealt with, the king and Thomas would sport together, like boys of the same age, in hall, in church and out riding together". He also describes Thomas's entertainment: "He hardly ever dined without the company of sundry earls and barons... His board was resplendent with gold and silver vessels and abounded in dainty dishes and precious wines." And Henry himself would come: "Sometimes the king, bow in hand as he returned from the hunt or was about to set off, rode on horseback into the hall where the chancellor sat at table... sometimes he would jump over the table and sit down to meat with him. Never in the whole Christian era were two men more of one mind or better friends."

And when the English invaded the county of Toulouse in the autumn of 1159, Thomas seems to have been in command of the army after Henry left to fight the French in Normandy. "Donning hauberk and helmet, the chancellor put himself at the head of a strong force and stormed three castles, which were strongly fortified and impregnable. He then crossed the Garonne with his troops in pursuit of the enemy, and, after confirming the whole province in its allegiance to the king, returned in high favour and honour." To all appearances, Thomas was relishing his role as a great secular magnate.

Six years after Thomas became chancellor, his old master, Archbishop Theobald, died. By now, Henry's schemes for establishing royal power and justice were well under way and, as Thomas had probably helped to develop them, he seemed the obvious choice to replace Theobald. It's likely that Henry secured the blessing of the pope, Alexander III, before telling Thomas of the appointment.

And with that the tragedy begins. Thomas was duly elected in May 1162. In the words of a modern historian, "he threw off the layman and became the complete archbishop". At the beginning of June he resigned the chancellorship, apparently on the advice of the most senior of the English bishops, Henry of Blois, bishop of Winchester. It may be that his relationship with the king was already on the wane. It was later said that Thomas had already warned Henry that his appointment as archbishop would be fatal to their relationship. In that, he was proved spectacularly prescient.

But even if the details are exaggerated, Thomas's sudden change from a great officer of state with appropriate secular pomp to ascetic archbishop has puzzled historians ever since. Had he

experienced a conversion like that of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus? The apparent contrast between Thomas as chancellor and Thomas as archbishop is as sharp as that between Saul the persecutor of Christians and Saint Paul the father of the church.

Even more puzzling is his unrelenting stance regarding the programme of justice that he had helped Henry to initiate in these early years of the king's reign. As someone trained in canon law and experienced in English royal law, Thomas must have known that there were many points at which Henry's intentions would bring him into conflict with the church. However, there is from the outset every sign that he had decided not to negotiate or to give ground, but to defend the church's privileges with all his might.

On becoming archbishop, Thomas attempted to restore the lands seized from the church of Canterbury during Stephen's reign. He had the king's permission to do this, it seems, but he encountered problems. The strategically important castle at Tonbridge was now in the possession of Roger de Clare, Earl of Hertford, one of the most influential of Henry's barons. Thomas excommunicated another important lord, William of Eynsford, over a claim to the church at Eynsford, but Henry forced the archbishop to absolve William.

Knowing Henry's intelligence and determination, Thomas may have feared that if he yielded on any point of dispute Henry would only press him further. But in July 1163, at a council held at the palace of Woodstock, Thomas attacked a proposal of Henry's, which was essentially a reform of taxation with little if any conflict with ecclesiastical law. He did so on the grounds that it was an unprecedented and arbitrary innovation, as if he had become the defender of the ancient royal customs of England. It was now two years since he had first known that he was to be archbishop – and in this time he had moved from being a supporter of Henry's plans to outright opposition.

This ill-tempered approach pervaded the archbishop's relations with the king throughout the rest of his life – and Henry, renowned for his violent temper, responded in kind. The king's actions, however, smack of a cold and resolute determination to humiliate the archbishop. Thomas had insisted on what we now call 'benefit of clergy': the right of anyone in holy orders to be tried in a church court, and only in a church court. Such 'criminous clerks', as they were called, could not be imprisoned by the king or put to death. In response, Henry attacked Thomas personally. The king raked up claims against him from his time as chancellor, claiming huge sums from him that the archbishop could not possibly pay.

This was Henry's weakest moment in many ways: he was responding to an issue that struck at the heart of the differences between the church's new ambitions and the royal agenda with

GETTY

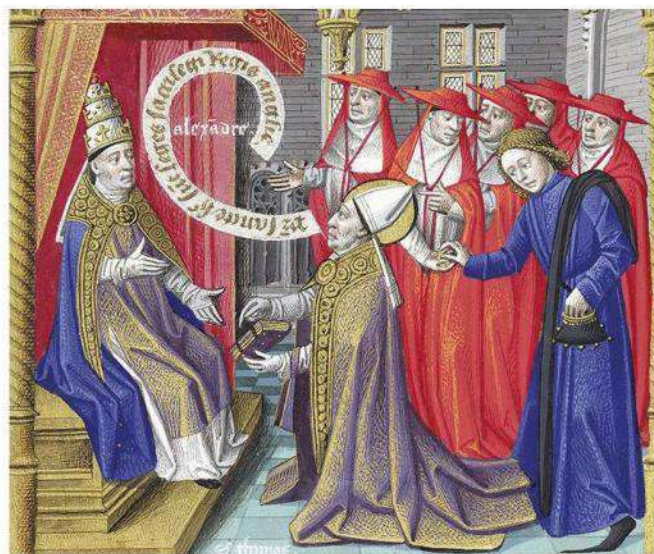


A 14th-century illumination shows Henry II in conversation with Thomas Becket. The pair's friendship had turned sour, and the archbishop was hellbent on obstructing Henry's every move – an approach that repeatedly enraged the king

AKG-IMAGES

THE HISTORY ESSAY

Thomas's actions were those of a man bent on revenge and triumph, not of someone who was going to win back his position with King Henry by conciliation and patient negotiation



Becket meets Pope Alexander III. Fearful of provoking the ire of Henry II, the pontiff was unwilling to offer Becket his full support

a personal attack on Thomas. It was as if he sought to prove that even the archbishop could be arraigned in a royal court.

These claims against Thomas, and the argument as to whether he could be judged for them in a secular court, came to a head at a council in Northampton in 1164. Thomas had compounded his offences in the king's eyes by opposing the provisions of the document setting out in writing the ancient customs of England, which Henry had presented at an earlier council at Clarendon in January 1164. Now, in Northampton, these tensions broke out into open conflict. And it wasn't just the king who had an axe to grind with Thomas: the great magnates, who had never had much love for the upstart merchant's son, shouted insults at him when he declared that the barons had no authority to sit in judgment on him. Thomas, however, did not maintain a dignified silence but hurled abuse back.

The same ill-temper was evident when Thomas, fearing for his safety, fled to Flanders. There he was visited by the justiciar (chief justice) Richard de Lucy, who pleaded with him to return to England. Thomas refused, and the encounter ended with a violent quarrel during which de Lucy withdrew the homage he had once paid to the archbishop.

Both sides appealed to Pope Alexander III, and he would probably have preferred to back Thomas to the hilt – if it wasn't for the fact that he was one of two popes. The Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick

Barbarossa, had just recognised Alexander's rival, Victor IV, as pontiff – and, fearing Henry II might do the same, Alexander was keen to reach a compromise. In the summer of 1165 he ordered Thomas not to provoke the king in any way before Easter 1166, so anxious was he to preserve Henry's good will. Once the ban expired, Thomas – in a move that surprised even his closest counsellors – launched a devastating series of excommunications against the English bishops and barons, sparing only the king himself. With the victims at once appealing to the pope, a settlement appeared less likely than ever.

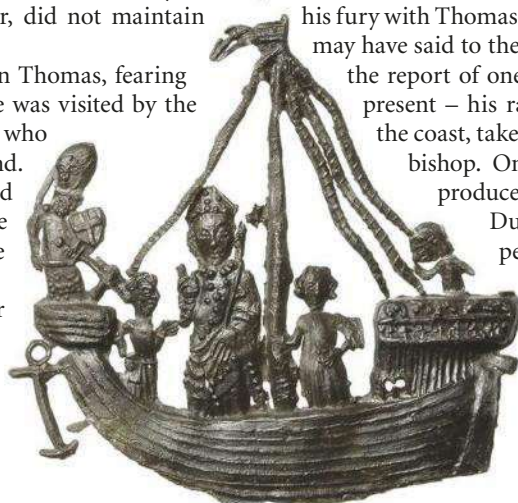
But a settlement needed to be found, and the pope began interminable negotiations for Thomas's return. Meetings with the legates sent by the pope broke up in acrimony, but there were rare moments when Thomas and Henry met and seemed to renew their old friendship – and, as a result, peace terms were eventually agreed. However, the entente was soon to break down in spectacular style.

Against tradition – but not church law – Henry's eldest son, also named Henry, had been crowned king by the archbishop of York and the bishops of London and Salisbury earlier in the year, to ensure that he succeeded his father. Henry had letters from the pope from some years earlier giving permission for the ceremony. Thomas retaliated in kind by using letters of excommunication against them that the pope had issued, also some time earlier.

It was the act of a man bent on revenge, not of someone who was going to win back his position by conciliation and patient negotiation. By calling into question the validity of the coronation, Thomas was striking at the heart of one of Henry's most cherished schemes. During the years of exile, the archbishop seemed to have lost his judgment of affairs and to have withdrawn into a steely bitterness.

In that, he wasn't alone: when Henry heard the news in France his fury with Thomas also led him to lose control. Whatever he may have said to the assembled courtiers – and we only have the report of one of Thomas's biographers, who was not present – his rage inspired the four knights to ride to the coast, take ship for England, and confront the archbishop. On this occasion, intransigence and rage produced bloody murder.

Due to a lack of eyewitness evidence or personal letters, it can be difficult for



A pewter pilgrim badge shows Becket standing on a ship while returning to England from his exile on the continent. A month later, he would be dead

BRIDGEMAN/MUSEUM OF LONDON

There's no doubt that the issue of both royal and papal authority proved an insoluble problem in Henry and Thomas's clash. But the outcome was exacerbated by the personalities of the two protagonists



Thomas Becket departs from Henry II at Montmirail in France after negotiations between the two had broken down. He would soon oppose Henry's decision to have his son crowned king – a move that would send their relationship spiralling to new lows

historians to trace the moods and motives of the people about whom they write. But in this case we have abundant evidence, mostly from the biographers of Thomas in the years following his death and from his own letters. There is rather less on Henry's side, but even those who knew him well do not attempt to conceal his fierce temper and stubbornness. Only the extreme scenes of his rolling on the floor chewing the rushes and tearing his clothes when in a rage come under suspicion, as they appear rather too close to medical descriptions of madness.

It is easy, as some historians have done, to portray Henry as the villain of the piece, describing a king surrounded by "slippery" advisors, "feeling utterly humiliated" and "bawling insults". This is not in the sources, even the most hostile ones.

I personally see Henry as a cool and calculating man, prone to occasional disastrous outbursts of temper. Thomas, meanwhile, comes across as determined but resolutely undiplomatic, genuinely spiritual in his exile but ultimately unsure of himself – a man who relied on the advice of his followers at critical moments.

Of course, there were high principles and deep politics involved in the quarrel between Henry and Thomas, and there's no doubt that the issue of both royal and papal authority proved an

insoluble problem. But the outcome was exacerbated by the two protagonists. Thomas, despite his sainthood and undeserved martyrdom, was as much at fault as Henry. Indeed, the Norman poet who, in 1169, described Henry as blameless and Thomas as iniquitous may have more of a point than we know. What should have been an argument – however hotly disputed – conducted between the highest representatives of church and state had become fatally enmeshed in a clash of personalities. **H**

Richard Barber is a historian who has written several books on medieval England, including *Edward III and the Triumph of England* (Allen Lane, 2013)

DISCOVER MORE

BOOK

► **Henry II (Penguin Monarchs): A Prince Among Princes** by Richard Barber (Allen Lane, 2015)

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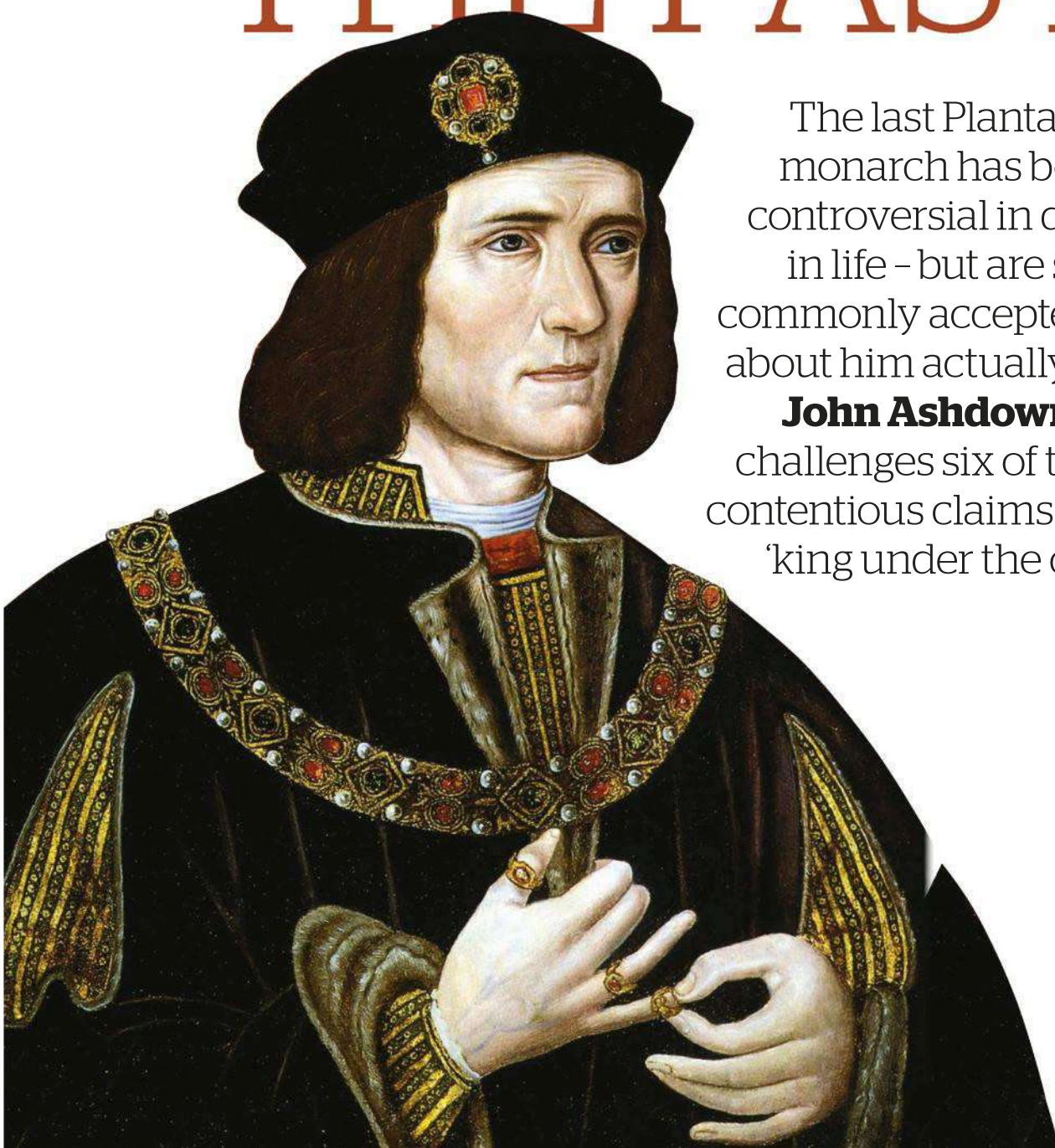
► To listen to Richard Barber discussing **another medieval king, Edward III**, on the History Extra podcast, go to [historyextra.com/podcast/fresh-look-edward-iii](https://www.historyextra.com/podcast/fresh-look-edward-iii)

RICHARD III: REWRITING THE PAST

The last Plantagenet monarch has been as controversial in death as in life – but are some commonly accepted beliefs about him actually myths?

John Ashdown-Hill

challenges six of the most contentious claims about the 'king under the car park'





One of Paul Delaroche's famed 19th-century paintings of Edward V and his brother Richard, Duke of York – the so-called 'princes in the Tower'. Legend (and Shakespeare) suggests that Richard III killed his nephews – but, says John Ashdown Hill, there's no evidence they were murdered



Claim 1 *Richard was a murderer*

The catalogue of killings attributed to the king is lengthy – but also erroneous

In Shakespeare's play *Richard III*, the list of Richard's alleged murder victims provides an illustrious roll call of ghosts who prevent his sleep on the last night of his life. These comprise Edward of Westminster (son of King Henry VI); Henry VI himself; George, Duke of Clarence; Earl Rivers; Richard Grey; Thomas Vaughan; Lord Hastings; the 'princes in the Tower'; the Duke of Buckingham; and Richard's own queen, Anne Neville.

But Clarence, Rivers, Grey, Vaughan and Buckingham were all executed (a legal process), not murdered. Clarence was executed by Edward IV, probably at the behest of Elizabeth Woodville. Rivers, Grey and Vaughan were executed by the Earl of Northumberland, while Hastings and Buckingham were executed by Richard III because they had conspired against him. Intriguingly, similar subsequent actions by Henry VII are viewed instead as a sign of 'strong kingship'.

There is no conclusive evidence that Henry VI or the 'princes in the Tower' – Edward V and Richard, Duke of York – were murdered by anyone. Edward of Westminster was killed at or after the battle of Tewkesbury, and Anne Neville almost certainly died naturally. In addition, if Richard III really had been a serious killer in the interests of his own ambitions, why didn't he kill Lord and Lady Stanley – and, indeed, John Morton?

Morton had plotted with Lord Hastings in 1483 but, whereas Hastings was executed, Morton was only imprisoned. As for the Stanleys, Lady Stanley was involved in Buckingham's rebellion. And in June 1485, when the invasion of his stepson Henry was imminent, Lord Stanley requested leave to retire from court. His loyalty had always been somewhat doubtful. Nevertheless, Richard III simply granted Stanley's request – leading ultimately to the king's own defeat at Bosworth.



The arms of Richard III, shown in a stained-glass window in York Minster



Claim 2 *Richard was a usurper*

Richard took the throne in place of his nephew, Edward V – but the change of power was proposed and approved by others

A dictionary definition of ‘usurp’ is “to seize and hold (the power and rights of another, for example) by force or without legal authority”. It’s intriguing to note that the official website of the British Monarchy formerly stated (erroneously) that “Richard III usurped the throne from the young Edward V.”

Curiously, the monarchy website does not describe either Henry VII or Edward IV as usurpers, yet both of those kings seized power by force in battle. On the other hand, Richard III did not seize power. He was offered the crown by two estates of the realm –

the Lords and Commons, who had come to London for the opening of a prospective parliament in 1483 – on the basis of evidence presented to them by one of the bishops, to the effect that Edward IV had committed bigamy and that Edward V and his siblings were, therefore, bastards.

Even if that judgement was incorrect, the fact remains that it was a legal authority that invited a (possibly reluctant) Richard to assume the role of king. His characterisation as a ‘usurper’ is therefore simply an example of how history is rewritten by the victors – in this case, Henry VII.

Richard III’s characterisation as a usurper is simply another example of how **history is rewritten by the victors**



Elizabeth of York, niece of Richard III. After the death of Richard's wife Anne Neville, rumours circulated that he had poisoned Anne in order to marry Elizabeth – who later wed Henry VII

BRIDGEMAN



Claim 3 *Richard intended to marry his niece*

Despite whispers at the time, the king never planned to wed his predecessor's daughter

It has frequently been claimed (on the basis of reports of a letter, the original of which does not survive) that in 1485 Richard III planned to marry his niece, Elizabeth of York, eldest daughter of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville. There is no doubt that rumours to this effect were current in 1485, and we know for certain that Richard was concerned about them. That is not surprising, since his invitation to mount the throne had been based upon the conclusion that all of Edward IV's children were bastards.

Obviously, no sensible monarch would have sought to marry a bastard niece. In fact, very clear evidence survives that proves beyond question that Richard did intend to remarry after the death of his wife, Anne Neville, in 1485. However, his chosen bride was the Portuguese princess Joanna. What's more, his diplomats in Portugal were also seeking to arrange a second marriage there – between Richard's allegedly illegitimate niece, Elizabeth, and a minor member of the Portuguese royal family.



Claim 4 *Richard slept at the Boar Inn in Leicester*

The inn that reputedly hosted the king may not yet have existed

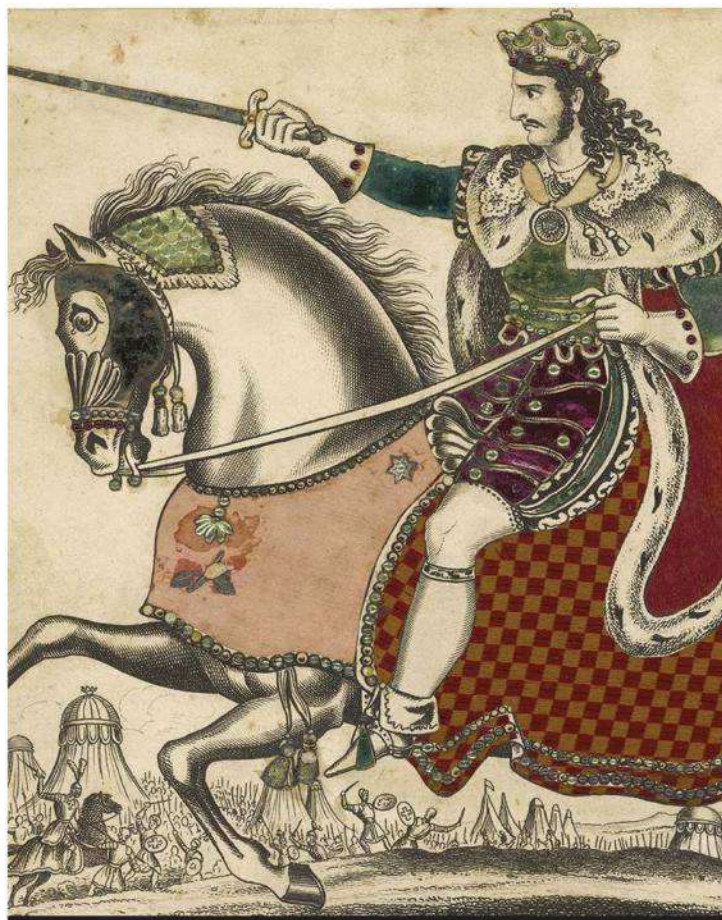
In August 1485, prior to the battle of Bosworth, Richard III spent one night in Leicester. About a century later, a myth emerged claiming that on his final visit he had slept at a Leicester inn that carried the sign of a boar. This story is still very widely believed today.

However, there is no evidence that such an inn even existed in 1485. We know that on Richard's rare visits to Leicester before then, he stayed at the castle. The earliest written source for the story of the Boar (or Blue Boar) Inn visit is John Speede, an English cartographer and historian who died in 1629.

Speede also produced another myth about Richard III – that his body had been dug up at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries. Many in Leicester used to believe Speede's story about the fate of Richard's body. However, when the BBC commissioned me to research it in 2004, I concluded that it was false – and I was proved right when the king's remains were discovered on the Greyfriars site in 2012. His reputed stay at the Boar Inn is probably also nothing more than a later invention.



An 18th-century engraving of the Boar Inn in Leicester, where Richard III reputedly slept in 1485 before the battle of Bosworth



Richard III is depicted astride his horse in a later engraving – though the story of his white steed was invented by Shakespeare



Claim 5 *Richard rode a white horse at Bosworth*

Shakespeare was the likely origin of the belief that the king bestrode 'White Surrey' into battle

In his play about the king, Shakespeare has Richard III order his attendants to "Saddle white Surrey [Syrie] for the field tomorrow." On this basis it is sometimes stated as fact that Richard rode a white horse at his final battle. But before Shakespeare wrote his play, no one had recorded this fact, though an earlier 16th-century chronicler, Edward Hall, had

said that Richard rode a white horse when he entered Leicester a couple of days before the battle.

There is no evidence to prove either point. Not is there any proof that Richard owned a horse called 'White Syrie' or 'White Surrey'. However, we do know that his stables contained grey horses (horses with a coat of white hair).

Shakespeare has Richard order his attendants to **"Saddle white Surrey for the field tomorrow"**



Claim 6 *Richard attended his last mass at Sutton Cheney church*

The king had his own chaplains, so would not have needed to attend mass in a church

It was claimed in the 1920s that, early on the morning of 22 August 1485, Richard III made his way from his camp to Sutton Cheney in order to attend mass at the church of St James there. No earlier source exists for this unlikely tale, which appears to have been invented in order to provide an ecclesiastical focus for modern commemorations of Richard.

A slightly different version of this story was circulated before the reburial of the king's remains in 2015, to justify plans to stop at Sutton Cheney en route to final interment

in Leicester – that it is believed Richard took his final mass at St James' Church on the eve of the battle.

For a priest to celebrate mass in the evening (at a time when he would have been required to fast from the previous midnight before taking communion) would have been very unusual. Moreover, documentary evidence shows clearly that Richard's army at Bosworth was accompanied by his own chaplains, who would normally have celebrated mass for the king in his tent. **II**

This unlikely tale appears to have been invented **to provide an ecclesiastical focus for modern commemorations**

.....
John Ashdown-Hill is the author
of *The Mythology of Richard III*
(Amberley Publishing, 2015)



St James' Church, Sutton Cheney, near the Bosworth battlefield site. The claim that Richard III attended mass here on the eve of the battle first appeared as late as the 1920s

THE PRIN

A bronze statue of Owain Glyndŵr, erected in 2007 in Corwen. It was just a few miles away in his home of Glyndyfrdwy that Glyndŵr was proclaimed Prince of Wales in 1400

LAST WELSH CE OF WALES

Six centuries after Owain Glyndŵr's death, **Huw Pryce** looks at the national hero who sought a brighter future for his country by rising up against English rule



On Thursday 16 September 1400 a group of Welshmen gathered at Glyndyfrdwy, an estate named after the nearby river Dee (Welsh: Dyfrdwy), to perform a dramatic act of defiance against the English crown: the proclamation of Owain Glyndŵr, lord of the estate, as Prince of Wales.

The elevation of Owain Glyndŵr, as he is better known, marked the beginning of a rising that in a few years had engulfed virtually the whole of Wales, and threatened to reverse Edward I's conquest of the country in 1282–84. For the meeting at Glyndyfrdwy was more than an act of bravado. Over the following week forces loyal to Owain instilled terror through a series of raids in north-east Wales and the borders, similar to the *chévauchées* of English armies against the French in the Hundred Years' War. They pillaged and burned a swathe of towns including Ruthin, Denbigh and Welshpool.

Small wonder that the townspeople of Oswestry, another victim of these attacks, later claimed that Owain and his followers had launched a treacherous conspiracy aimed at nothing less than the death of Henry IV of England, his son Henry, all magnates and nobles in England, the destruction of the English monarchy, and “the everlasting extinction of the whole English language” (that is, the English people). Though this report was overblown,

the Welsh rising under Owain Glyndŵr certainly unleashed considerable violence and destruction.

The English authorities and, later, English historians in the early modern period branded the prince a rebel and a traitor (though Shakespeare's portrayal of ‘Owen Glendower’ was more sympathetic). And, after the collapse of the rising, Welsh attitudes tended to be ambivalent at best. It was only in the 19th century that Glyndŵr began to be widely hailed in Wales as a national hero.

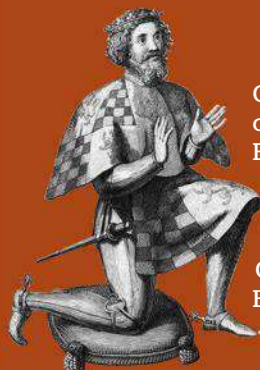
These posthumous images of Glyndŵr offer fascinating insights into the ideals projected on to him by later generations. However, simply to paint him as a hero or a villain would be to miss his significance in the context of his own time.

Royal descent

Before 1400 there had been little to indicate that Owain would rise against the crown. Like many other Welsh gentry of the period, he had shown himself ready to accommodate the regime established by Edward I's conquest. He had studied law at the Inns of Court in London and served in royal armies in England, Scotland and France. He had married Margaret Hanmer, from a notable border family, whose father had been a judge in the Court of King's Bench.

Yet that was only part of the picture. Within Welsh society Owain occupied a special place thanks to his descent, through his father, from the princes of northern

The life of Owain Glyndŵr



Owain is an esquire of Richard Fitzalan (left), Earl of Arundel. **This reflected a tradition of service to the Fitzalans** as lords of Oswestry, Chirk, and Bromfield and Yale

Owain wins a devastating victory at Bryn Glas, near the village of Pilleth in Radnorshire. **He captures the powerful Marcher lord Edmund Mortimer**, who later defects to him

c1359

Owain Glyndŵr is born. His father, Gruffydd Fychan, is descended from the princes of Powys (north-east Wales) and his mother, Elen, from the princes of Deheubarth (south-west Wales)

March 1387



Owain is proclaimed Prince of Wales by supporters on his estate at Glyndyfrdwy, near Corwen. His banner (left) presented him as the true prince

16 September 1400

22 June 1402

Henry IV's eldest son, Prince Henry (the future King Henry V), appointed royal lieutenant in Wales on 8 March, **burns Owain's homes** at Glyndyfrdwy and Sycharth

May 1403

At Aberystwyth Castle (left) **Owain ratifies a treaty**, agreed in Paris on 14 July 1404, with Charles VI of France to make common cause against Henry IV of England

12 January 1405



Owain summons four representatives from each commote (administrative division) in Wales recognising his authority to a parliament at Harlech. This follows a parliament held at Machynlleth (above) the previous year

August 1405

In a two-part letter sent from Pennal (Merioneth) to Charles VI of France, **Owain declares the allegiance of Wales** to Benedict XIII, the pope at Avignon (right), who was backed by the French



31 March 1406

The English retake Harlech Castle. They capture members of Owain's family living there - including his wife and two of his daughters - and send them to London

February 1409

Owain dies. The places of his death and burial are unknown. Some claim that he ended his days in Herefordshire

cSeptember 1415

Powys and, through his mother, those of Deheubarth. After Owain Lawgoch (Owain of the Red Hand), the last male descendant of the dynasty of Gwynedd and a would-be Prince of Wales, had been assassinated by an English agent in France in 1378, Owain Glyndŵr had the strongest ties to the princely dynasties of the era before the conquest of 1282. Moreover, even before 1400 leading Welsh poets of the day, notably Iolo Goch, took pains to remind Glyndŵr of his distinguished pedigree that made him “sole head of Wales”.

A feeling of resentment that his status had not been sufficiently recognised, particularly through the granting of a knighthood, may have contributed to Owain's decision to rise against the crown. So, too, may the disruption to established ties of loyalty caused by changes in the pattern of lordship during the final crisis years of Richard II's reign, which ended with usurpation by Henry IV in 1399. The weakness of the new Lancastrian dynasty may also have helped tip the scales in favour of the decision to revolt. Possibly the immediate catalyst was a territorial dispute with Reginald Grey, Lord of Ruthin.

Yet the recognition of Owain as Prince of Wales in September 1400 was not simply an impetuous response to a sense of personal slight. The meeting at Glyndyfrdwy was a stage-managed occasion that deliberately evoked the past in order to challenge the foundations of English rule in Wales. The message was simple: Owain Glyndŵr, not Henry IV's son Prince Henry, was the true successor of the native princes of Wales whose power had been destroyed by Edward I more than a century before.

Owain drove the message home on his great seal. This not only styled him “Owain by the grace of God Prince of Wales” but also, by depicting the arms (four lions rampant) of the princes of Gwynedd, presented him as the successor of the last Welsh rulers to have borne the title Prince of Wales. Likewise Owain referred to “our forefathers the Princes of Wales” in a letter to King Charles VI of France. As so often in the Middle Ages, revolutionary change was presented as the restoration of a more authentic past.

Drumming up support

In agreeing to be proclaimed prince, Owain must have been confident of receiving support. That support depended on his countrymen recognising the legitimacy of his claim – conferred on him by his ancestry and the tradition of princely rule he sought to resurrect. This enabled him to attract the loyalty of his fellow gentry – including their relatives among the clergy, who were



A portrait of Henry IV of England, whose new Lancastrian regime was threatened by Owain Glyndŵr's Welsh revolt

Glyndŵr's revolt quickly spread throughout the whole of Wales as castles were seized and English forces were defeated

frustrated by the restricted opportunities for advancement – as well as Welsh students at Oxford and Cambridge. In addition, in February 1401 the commons in parliament complained that Welsh agricultural labourers in England “had suddenly fled the said realm for their same country of Wales, and had strongly equipped themselves with arms, bows, arrows and swords and other weapons of war, such as they had not done at any time since the conquest of Wales”.

However, support was also contingent on military success. The best evidence for Glyndŵr's wide appeal is the spread of the revolt from its origins in the north-east across most of Wales. In April 1401 the prince's cousins Gwilym ap Tudur and Rhys ap Tudur (ancestors of Henry VII) tricked their way into Conwy Castle and held it for two months, while in the summer Glyndŵr moved west into Cardiganshire and defeated the English at the battle of Hyddgen. By June 1402 his forces were deployed in mid-Wales, near the English border, where he defeated and captured Sir Edmund Mortimer at the battle of Bryn Glas. This victory had more than military significance, as by the end of the year Mortimer had defected to Glyndŵr and married his daughter Catrin.

Meanwhile, Owain's appearance in Glamorgan was greeted with a rising in his

support. By summer 1403 the momentum of the revolt seemed unstoppable, as Owain led his forces to the Tywi valley and received the surrender of Carmarthen, the centre of English royal authority in south Wales for three centuries.

True, everything did not go the prince's way. He suffered several defeats, and on 21 July his allies Henry Percy (Hotspur) and Thomas Percy were killed by royal forces at the battle of Shrewsbury. Yet Owain was determined to stamp his authority on Wales. In 1404, Harlech and Aberystwyth castles fell to him, as did the town of Cardiff. He held his first parliament in Machynlleth, thereby signalling an aspiration to build on military successes by creating political institutions.

Glyndŵr also tried to internationalise the conflict. In July 1404 his representatives concluded a formal treaty in Paris with King Charles VI of France. As a result, 12 months later a large French force landed at Milford Haven and marched through south Wales, possibly reaching the outskirts of Worcester. Earlier in 1405 Owain had made an agreement, known as the Tripartite Indenture, with Edmund Mortimer and Henry Percy (father of Henry ‘Hotspur’) to depose Henry IV and divide the kingdom between them, with Owain receiving an expanded Wales as his share.

Yet despite the attempts to secure help from outside Wales, from 1405 Owain suffered increasing setbacks. His brother was killed and his son captured at the battle of Pwll Melyn near Usk in May 1405, and after about two months the French army retreated without a major confrontation with Henry IV's forces. A letter sent by Glyndŵr from Pennal in Merioneth in March 1406 – in which he attempted to reinforce the French alliance by declaring the allegiance of Wales to the Avignon papacy, and called for an independent Welsh church and two universities – is often quoted as evidence of the prince's political vision. However, the need to make this approach, as well as its failure to secure further French aid, reflected Owain's growing vulnerability, as an increasingly effective response by the English crown – including economic sanctions as well as military campaigns – led to the surrender of communities across Wales.

In 1408 any hopes vested in the Tripartite Indenture were dashed by the defeat of Henry Percy at the battle of Bramham Moor in Yorkshire, and by the following year the English had recaptured Aberystwyth and Harlech castles. Though sporadic attacks continued for some years, Glyndŵr was now an outlaw on the run rather than a national leader attracting loyalty and inspiring fear

How did Glyndŵr meet his end?

Mystery still remains about how Owain spent his last days and where he has lain for 600 years

The date and circumstances of Owain Glyndŵr's death have been the subject of speculation for centuries. According to Welsh annals composed in the 15th century, "[in] 1415 Owain went into hiding on St Matthew's Day in Harvest [21 September], and thereafter his hiding-place was unknown. Very many say that he died; the seers maintain that he did not."

Other 15th-century sources agree in placing his death on 20 or 21 September 1415. Owain's contemporary, the chronicler Adam of Usk, alleged that **the prince was buried secretly at night but was later reburied at an unknown location.**

The historian Elis Gruffudd (died c1556) related as many as three different accounts of the prince's demise. And by the late 17th century a history of the rising reported that Glyndŵr had died at the house of one of his daughters in Herefordshire.

Though Glyndŵr's death is shrouded in mystery **his impact on later generations cannot be doubted.** A largely sympathetic account in Thomas Pennant's *Tour in Wales* (1778) helped to transform Owain from cruel and destructive rebel to patriotic hero. His reputation reached its height between about 1870 and 1920, when he was celebrated as the greatest Welshman who had ever lived.

This didn't mean that he inspired demands for Welsh independence from England. Rather, **his name was invoked in support of a wider patriotism to the British empire** in which Wales occupied an honoured place as its oldest part. During the fifth centenary of his death in 1915, his heroic battle for freedom against superior odds was compared to the struggles faced by the small nations of Belgium and Serbia against Germany and its allies, and was used to encourage Welsh recruitment for the British war effort.

Owain Glyndŵr's seal, with the words 'Princeps Wallie' for Prince of Wales



Charles VI of France (1380–1422) and his court. Charles sealed a treaty with Owain Glyndŵr in July 1404, sending troops to help the Welsh cause. However, despite marching through south Wales, Charles's troops headed home without engaging the English in a major battle

across the length and breadth of Wales. However, unlike some other Welsh princes earlier in the Middle Ages, he was never betrayed by his own people or captured.

Modern vision

Despite the ultimate failure of his uprising, it would be rash to dismiss Owain Glyndŵr as a romantic dreamer. For one thing, we have hints of a vision of Wales as a modern state, with parliaments and a bureaucracy trained in its own universities, even if the evidence is too fragmentary to deduce whether, or how far, Owain and his advisers devised a blueprint for the future of his principality, including its constitutional relationship with England.

In seeking to realise his vision, Glyndŵr combined a readiness to exploit opportunities to form alliances beyond Wales with a shrewd ability to mobilise widespread support by tapping into Welsh political culture. Thus Owain not only presented himself as the successor of the princes whose rule had ended in 1282, but also became identified with the centuries-old prophetic tradition of a Welsh deliverer. This foretold the expulsion of the Saxons from the island of Britain and the restoration of the Britons' descendants, the Welsh, to the sovereignty they had allegedly enjoyed before the Anglo-Saxon conquests.

That Owain deliberately identified himself with this prophetic tradition is suggested by the presence of Crach Ffynnant, described as a 'prophet', at his proclamation as Prince of Wales. Likewise, in 1403 Glyndŵr sought advice on his future prospects from Hopcyn ap Thomas of Ynysforgan, who enjoyed a reputation as a 'master of *brud* (prophecy)'.

Adherence to this mythic view of the past and future is also apparent in the prince's strongly anti-English rhetoric. For example,

in seeking the support of Henry Don (Dwn), a powerful landholder in Kidwelly in south Wales, Owain announced that he hoped, "by God's help and yours, to deliver the Welsh race from the captivity of our English enemies, who, already for a long time now elapsed, have oppressed us and our ancestors". He also complained to Charles VI of France that Wales had long been oppressed by "the fury of the barbarous Saxons".

The punitive statutes passed against the Welsh show that the English parliament and crown also saw the rising essentially in terms of a conflict between two peoples: both Glyndŵr and the royal authorities stoked further ethnic tensions.

For several years, then, Owain Glyndŵr posed a major challenge to Henry IV's new Lancastrian regime. However, what makes him significant is not so much the dramatic successes he achieved in overthrowing the political order established by the Edwardian conquest of Wales. Rather, the support he garnered for his attempt to renew the tradition of Welsh princely rule throws light on the tensions and aspirations of the Wales of his day. Above all, Glyndŵr's rising exposes the continuing salience of a political culture that conquest had failed to eradicate. **II**

Huw Pryce is professor of Welsh history at Bangor University. He has published widely on the history of medieval Wales and on Welsh history writing

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

► **Owain Glyn Dŵr: Prince of Wales** by RR Davies (Y Lolfa, 2009)

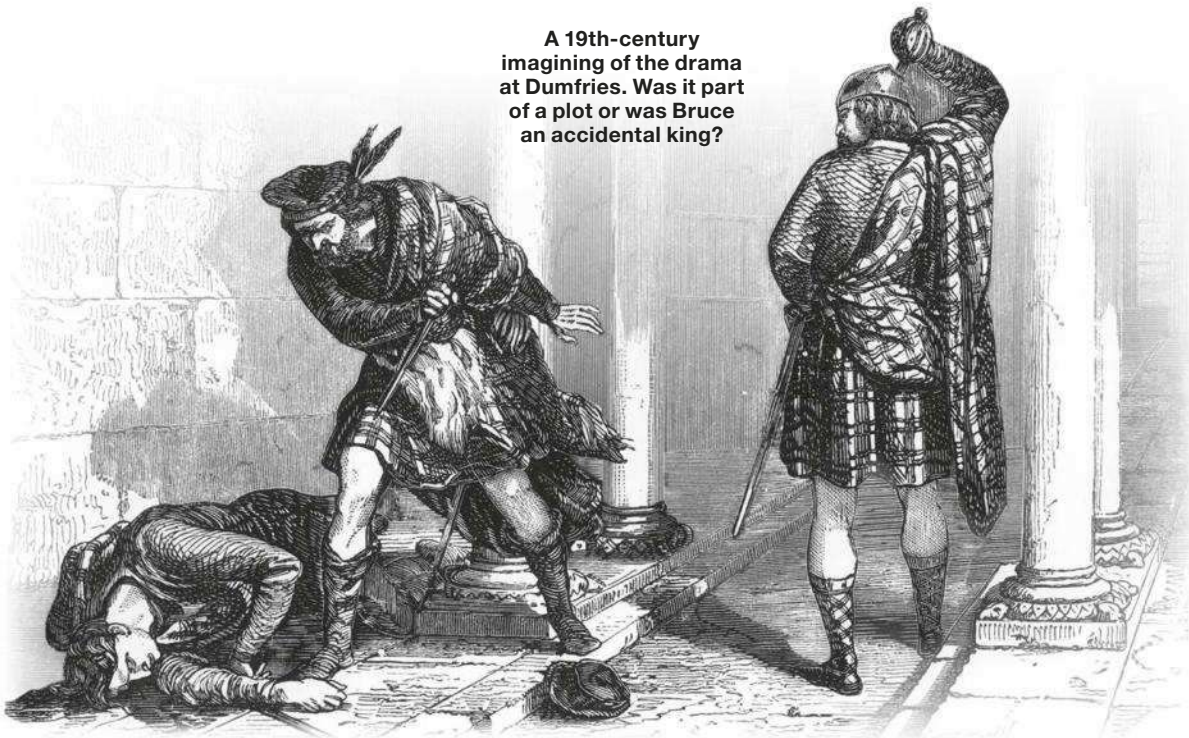
► **Owain Glyndŵr: A Casebook** by (eds) Michael Livingston and John K Bolland (Liverpool University Press, 2013)



ROBERT BRUCE

CHAMPION OF SCOTLAND OR MURDEROUS USURPER?

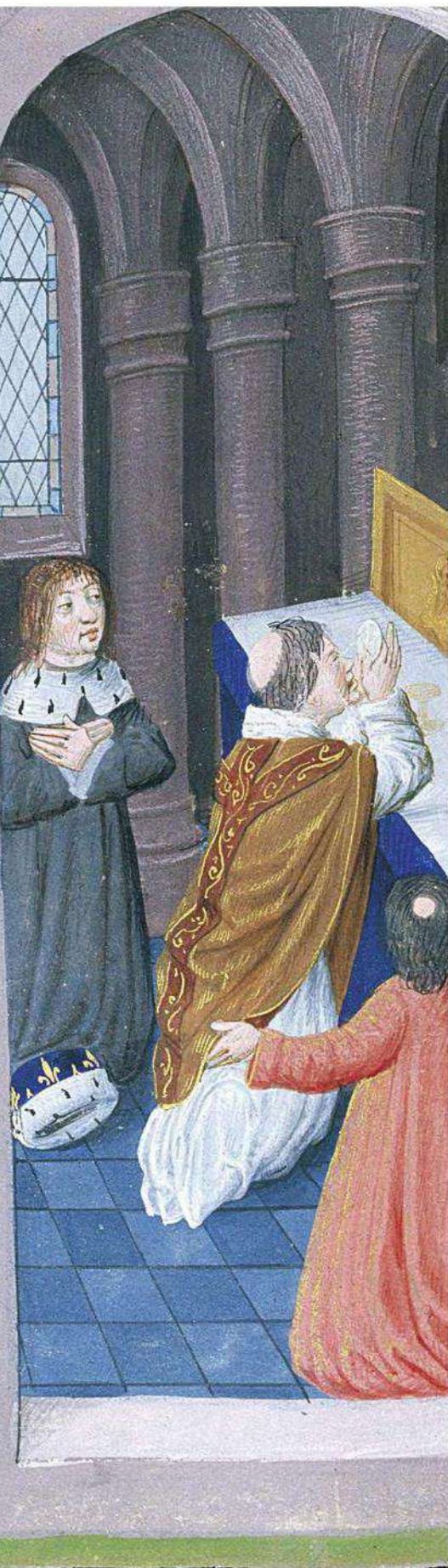
A 19th-century
imagining of the drama
at Dumfries. Was it part
of a plot or was Bruce
an accidental king?



Seven centuries after Robert Bruce seized the Scottish throne, **Michael Brown** considers whether this famous monarch had actually planned to take the crown in 1306



Edward I, having forced the Scots to submit in 1304, receives the homage of Scotland (shown in an illustration in a 15th-century manuscript)



A little over seven centuries ago, the most important political murder in Scottish history was committed. On 10 February 1306 John Comyn 'the Red' was slaughtered by Robert Bruce, Earl of Carrick, and his followers in an outburst of violence in the Greyfriars, the church of the Franciscans at Dumfries.

Comyn and Bruce were leading members of the Scottish nobility. They had been rivals and had recently fought on opposing sides in the wars between Edward I of England and the Scots. In early 1306, with Edward finally recognised as ruler of Scotland, the two lords met together in the Greyfriars church. At first the men seemed friendly, and Bruce talked alone with Comyn before the high altar.

Suddenly the mood changed. Bruce accused his rival of treachery. Making to walk away, Robert Bruce then turned back with sword drawn and struck Comyn. Bruce's followers rushed in, raining blows on John Comyn, who fell to the floor. Comyn's uncle, who joined the melee, was also cut down.

Bruce left the church and, mounting Comyn's horse, led his followers the short distance to Dumfries Castle where King Edward's justices were holding court. Breaking in, Bruce arrested the king's men – but then heard news that Comyn was still alive. He dispatched two of his men to the friary where they found John Comyn being tended by the friars in the vestry, wounded but not dying. After allowing him to make his confession, Bruce's men dragged Comyn back into the church and killed him on the altar steps, spattering the altar itself with blood. While Comyn's corpse was abandoned to the friars, Bruce rode from Dumfries to begin the uprising against Edward I that would climax with him being crowned king of Scots six weeks later.

Those seeking to understand these events saw Comyn's death as a deliberate step on Bruce's path to the throne. The English

investigation of the murder in 1306 concluded that Comyn was killed because "he would not assent to the treason that Bruce planned against the king of England, it is believed". In English chronicles of the period, Bruce lured Comyn to Dumfries to kill him. In Scottish accounts, by contrast, Bruce and Comyn agreed to work together for Scotland's freedom. Comyn, however, betrayed Bruce's plans to Edward I and was killed in revenge for his treachery.

All of these versions agree in identifying Bruce in February 1306 as a man preparing to launch a bid for the kingship, and killing Comyn to clear the way. The portrayal of Bruce as either cold-blooded killer or clear-sighted champion of his people suited the conflicting perceptions of later years. It placed the murder at the heart of a planned coup that would also involve Bruce's seizure of the throne and his war against the English king – a war that ultimately secured recognition of Scotland's independence.

However, these interpretations also relied on a heavy dose of hindsight. If viewed from the perspective of February 1306 do the conclusions of these accounts seem quite so clear? Was Bruce at that time focused on the seizure of the throne? Was the killing of Comyn on holy ground, an act bound to appal and alienate many Scots, a deed of calculated revolution? Did the immediate aftermath of Comyn's death – the six weeks before Bruce was crowned king – witness the unfolding of a planned coup? The answers lie in the evidence that emerged before Bruce assumed the reputation and role of hero king or bloody usurper.

The difficult years

In early 1306 Robert Bruce was not an obvious champion of Scottish liberties. He was in his early thirties, and his career had been shaped by the decade-long wars between Edward I (ruled England 1272–1307) and the Scots. The king of England had taken advantage of a succession crisis in Scotland after the death of Alexander III (who ruled Scotland 1249–86). Bruce's position in this conflict was defined by family interests, in part the Bruce claim to the Scottish throne. This had been rejected in favour of the rival rights of John Balliol in 1292, but with Balliol in exile from 1296 the Bruces did not abandon hope of a crown.

Though Bruce was conscious of his family's royal aspirations, it was his responsibilities as a nobleman that exerted most influence on his activities. As earls of Carrick and lords of Annandale in south-west Scotland as well as a number of English estates, the Bruces had to preserve

Bruce's men dragged Comyn back into the church and killed him on the altar steps, spattering the altar itself with blood



The troops of Edward I besiege Berwick Castle, on the Scottish border, after Scotland's defiance in 1296

lands in two warring kingdoms and protect their friends and tenants in the difficult years since 1296. In those years Bruce had played a shifting role. He had briefly led resistance to Edward I in 1297 and had been a guardian of Scotland between 1298 and 1300 but after both episodes had submitted to the English king.

From 1302 to 1304 he had been active in Edward's government of Scotland. Bruce's shifts of side were motivated less by a Machiavellian hope of winning the throne than by awareness of his duty to preserve his family's lands and tenants from the worst effects of war. His actions were normal among the Scottish nobility and were entirely understandable to contemporaries. They do not, though, reveal Bruce as a man committed to the abstract defence

of Scotland. Instead they suggest a young lord whose concerns were with more limited and pragmatic issues of lordship and loyalty.

In the months before February 1306 Robert Bruce continued to face these concerns in new circumstances. In 1304 Edward I finally compelled his leading Scottish enemies to submit to his rule. He was now the master of Scotland, and during the following year Scotland's nobles sought his favour and petitioned him for lands and offices. Bruce was one of this group. In April 1304 his father had died, and Bruce approached the king to receive his family's lordship of Annandale. The succession of enquiries into the Bruces' ancient rights in their estates probably encouraged Bruce to find allies. To this

end, in June 1304 he entered a bond or private alliance with William Lamberton, the bishop of St Andrews.

Political rivals

Though this was later used by the English to suggest a conspiracy between Bruce and one of the leaders of the Scottish church, its terms do not support this. Instead it was a formal statement of friendship between lords who had recently been on opposite sides in the war but who now saw the need to co-operate. Needing to secure his inheritance and under government scrutiny, Bruce would have found such an alliance valuable, especially as Lamberton became head of Edward's Scottish council.

Issues of land, lordship and influence within this Edwardian Scotland seem to

In negotiations Bruce indicated that he had taken castles and would “defend himself with the longest stick he had”

have preoccupied Robert Bruce in 1304–5. The same issues explain Bruce’s presence in Dumfries on 10 February and his meeting with John Comyn. The king’s justices were holding court in Dumfries, and as local landowners it would be natural for Bruce and Comyn to be present. For them to meet in private to discuss the court’s business would also be normal.

However, any meeting between these two men came with considerable baggage. Several accounts include a garbled tale of an indenture between Bruce and Comyn, which may indicate a promise of mutual support like that between Bruce and Bishop Lamberton. In the case of Bruce and John, however, any written expressions of friendship overlaid deep animosity: the two men were open political rivals.

Comyn’s family were long-standing opponents of the Bruces, and between 1302 and 1304, while Bruce served King Edward, Comyn had led the king’s enemies. They were also personal enemies. In 1299 Bruce and Comyn were the guardians of Scotland, leading the war against the English. When a dispute broke out between followers of the two men, Comyn turned on Bruce and seized him by the throat. Accusations of treason were flung at Bruce before the two men were separated. The mistrust and violence between Bruce and Comyn in 1299 may have flared again in February 1306, perhaps sparked by a similarly minor disagreement.

Seeking a deal

The closely contemporary account of Walter of Guisborough hints at this scenario. Bruce and Comyn met to discuss “certain matters touching both of them”. During the conversation Bruce charged Comyn with influencing King Edward against him. This suggests less the betrayal of a conspiracy than competition for royal favour between rivals – competition that had cost Bruce lands and offices, and may have broken a written promise of friendship. Old antagonisms spurred Bruce into an attack on Comyn, and others present joined in

the fight. The result was not assassination but a bloody scuffle.

The aftermath of the killing suggests that even then Bruce only slowly developed the intention of seizing the throne. It would be six weeks before he was crowned, and in this period the consequences of Comyn’s death and the nature of Bruce’s intentions only gradually unfolded. Vital evidence of this comes from an English report, crucially written in early March before Bruce took the throne. It shows him remaining in the south-west, taking castles and trying to recruit followers in the manner of previous aristocratic rebellions. The report also reveals that Bruce was negotiating with Edward I and his officials, and in these talks indicated that he had taken castles and would “defend himself with the longest stick that he had”.

This was not the unequivocal defiance of a king in waiting. Rather, it suggests a man trying to safeguard his position but still seeking a deal – perhaps a pardon for Comyn’s death. However, the report shows that such aims were changing. The writer identifies the key figure in this as Wishart, the bishop of Glasgow. Robert Wishart was a veteran defender of Scottish liberties, and in early March, as Bruce’s “chief adviser”, he absolved Bruce from his sins and “freed him to secure his heritage”.

This could mean only that Bruce was now determined to bid for the throne.



The start of a dynasty: Robert Bruce with his wife

THE JOURNEY OF A KING

November 1292

The Bruce claim to the throne is rejected. John Balliol becomes king of Scots. Robert Bruce is granted the earldom of Carrick by his father

1296

King John (Balliol) defies Edward I of England. Edward invades and conquers Scotland. John surrenders and is stripped of his regalia and title. The Bruces side with Edward

1297

Risings occur against the English government in Scotland. Bruce briefly joins the rebels. William Wallace leads the Scots in expelling the English

1304

After nearly eight years of war Edward I compels his Scottish enemies to submit on terms. The final act of war is the capture of Stirling Castle

10 February 1306

Bruce and his followers kill John Comyn at the Greyfriars Church in Dumfries

25 March 1306

Robert Bruce is crowned king of Scots at Scone near Perth. In June he is defeated at nearby Methven, and by the autumn is driven out of Scotland

February 1307

Bruce returns to south-west Scotland and wins local victories. Edward I dies in July, and Bruce extends his campaign

24 June 1314

At the battle of Bannockburn near Stirling, Bruce’s army defeats a larger force under Edward II of England

April 1320

The declaration of Arbroath is sent to Pope John. It stresses the unity of the nobility behind Bruce but in August the king suppresses a plot against him

17 March 1328

Peace is agreed with England, which renounces all rights to rule Scotland

7 June 1329

Robert I dies

The legacy of Robert Bruce

Robert Bruce was the key figure in Scotland's struggle to defend her independence in the early 14th century. His seizure of the throne in 1306 was the turning point in these wars against England, and marked the revival of the Scottish monarchy as the focal point of Scottish identity. At the time, however, Bruce was a hugely divisive figure. He had alienated many Scots, and for many years Bruce's main efforts were directed against internal enemies.

The crushing victory over Edward II of England at Bannockburn in 1314 cemented Bruce's control over Scotland and allowed him to entrench his position. As king he restored Scotland in his own image, handing power to trusted lieutenants and linking the Bruce dynasty to the ideal of an independent nation. Bruce needed to secure this achievement from external threats and gain recognition of his and Scotland's rights. International recognition was only achieved late in his life and culminated in a treaty with England that confirmed Scotland's separate status. Though Anglo-Scottish warfare resumed after his death in 1329, Bruce had provided the basis for his kingdom's independence and was rightly hailed by later generations as the saviour of Scotland.

Wishart provided the spiritual support. By releasing Bruce from his oath to Edward and from the sacrilege of slaying Comyn on holy ground, the bishop made Bruce a credible leader of the Scots. It had taken weeks for this move and it was only in March that Bruce started to widen his appeal and win support.

On 25 March Bruce was crowned King of Scots at Scone. The ceremony was make-shift and, though it demonstrated that the new king had gathered support from clergy, nobles and people, a majority stayed away, refusing to recognise the usurper or unwilling to risk sharing in his likely defeat.

Edward I's terrible retribution

Bruce had taken a huge gamble. He was on a path of no return, and by October he and his friends had paid a heavy price. Defeated three times in battle by English and Scottish enemies, Bruce fled the Scottish mainland. Many of his supporters and family suffered worse fates as Edward I wreaked a terrible punishment on those he regarded as perjured rebels. With stakes so high it would always have been a huge risk to plan

a rebellion against Edward. It would not be surprising if Bruce, a wealthy and influential noble with a career of cautious self-interest to his name, balked at such a gamble. Instead, through lingering personal antagonism that sparked an act of unpremeditated violence, Bruce put his future in jeopardy. By killing Comyn, Bruce had made enemies of John's family and following. As well as this blood feud Bruce now faced the judgement of Edward I – not a lenient or forgiving ruler.

In these unpromising circumstances, and influenced by Bishop Wishart, Bruce took

the decision that changed his life and Scotland's future. He laid claim to the title and authority of king, appealing to his family's allies and to those Scots who wished to renew the war against the English king. Despite the defeats of 1306 it would be in this role that Bruce would return to Scotland the following year. From 1307, as King of Scots, Robert Bruce would begin to win his realm. **H**

Michael Brown is professor in medieval Scottish history at the University of St Andrews, and author of *The Black Douglases: War and Lordship in Late Medieval Scotland, 1300–1455* (John Donald, 2005)

Bruce had taken a huge gamble. **He was on a path of no return.** By October he and his friends had paid a heavy price

The symbolic Stone of Scone was seized by Edward I and built into the Coronation Chair at Westminster Abbey, pictured before the stone was returned to Scotland in 1996



DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland** by Geoffrey Barrow (Edinburgh University Press, 2005)
- **The Wars of Scotland 1214–1371** by Michael Brown (Edinburgh University Press, 2004)
- **Robert the Bruce: King of the Scots** by Michael Penman (Yale University Press, 2014)

A QUEEN IN A KING'S WORLD

Helen Castor explores how Matilda, daughter of Henry I, came tantalisingly close to becoming England's first female 'king'



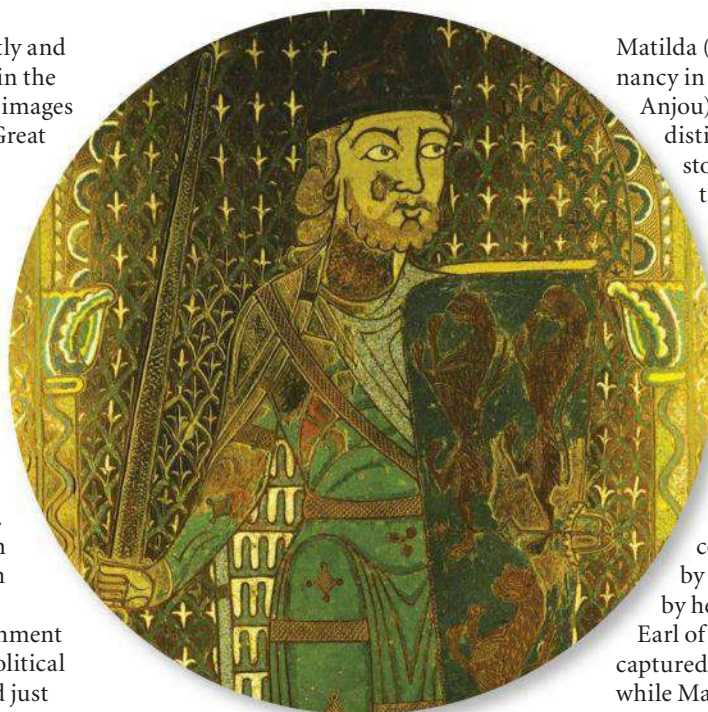
An engraving of the seal of the Empress Matilda, daughter of Henry I, by a 12th-century artist. The background is a 13th-century genealogical history of the kings of England

Power was inherently and inescapably male in the Middle Ages. The images displayed on the Great Seal of England encapsulated expectations of a medieval monarch. On one side the king sat in state, sceptre in hand, to administer justice to his people; on the other he rode a towering warhorse with his sword unsheathed, ready to defend his kingdom. But a woman couldn't sit as a judge or lead an army into battle. A woman, therefore, could not rule.

That, at least, was the unspoken assumption. However, England in the early 12th century had few hard-and-fast principles of government that could dictate the course of political events. After all, the kingdom had just experienced the greatest upheaval imaginable – the conquest of 1066, which left a new Norman aristocracy surveying an unfamiliar political landscape full of possibility and uncertainty, and one with lands on both sides of the Channel.

One unresolved question was how England's Norman crown was to be passed on. The conqueror himself had been bastard-born, and he was succeeded as king by his second son, William Rufus, followed by his youngest, Henry I, even though their eldest brother Robert Curthose was still alive. It seemed as though England's Norman monarchs would be chosen through some combination of designation and realpolitik from among the members of a particular dynastic bloodline – a system that might become a bloodbath if competition got out of hand.

But the ad hoc, shallow-rooted precedents of the previous 50 years precipitated crisis when Henry I died in 1135. His own accession to the throne had been achieved by means of a coup: Henry was with his brother William Rufus when the latter king was killed by a stray arrow in the New Forest in 1100, and Henry wasted no time in riding headlong for Winchester and Westminster to secure the royal treasury and his own coronation. Henry, however, was the archetypal poacher-turned-gamekeeper. He had seized the throne by force but his own bloodline, he was determined, would inherit by royal right. All his hopes were, therefore, pinned on his only legitimate son, William. It was to Henry's horror and prostrating grief, then, that the young man drowned in the wreck of the *White Ship* in 1120.



A 12th-century enamelled copper plaque showing Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, Matilda's second husband and father of King Henry II

Henry's son was gone, but he still had a daughter, Matilda. She, Henry insisted, would be his heir. Nor, under pressure from this frighteningly authoritative king, did his nobles demur – when they were summoned to swear to support Matilda as Henry's successor, the only argument that erupted concerned the question of who should have the honour of taking the oath first. No one spoke out to declare that a woman could not rule in her own right. After all, if there was no precedent to say that she could, there was equally none to say that she couldn't.

A cousin's coup

All that stood in the way of Matilda's path to the throne, it transpired, was another coup exactly like the one that had made her father king. When Henry died in 1135, his nephew Stephen raced from Boulogne to Winchester, where he was crowned before

"She was lifted up into an insufferable arrogance ... and alienated the hearts of almost everyone"

Matilda (who was immobilised by pregnancy in her second husband's county of Anjou) knew what was happening. Two distinct forms of royal legitimacy now stood in opposition to one another: the sacred anointing of a man with royal blood in his veins who could offer leadership of a familiar and decisive kind; and the designated succession of a woman who was the only legitimate child of the previous king.

The result was civil war. Despite her sex, Matilda's claim was not dismissed out of hand by the nobles she sought to rule. In fact, she proved able to command enough support that by the summer of 1141 her army, led by her illegitimate half-brother Robert, Earl of Gloucester, had defeated and captured Stephen at the battle of Lincoln, while Matilda advanced to Westminster, just outside London's city gates, to prepare for her own coronation.

Still no one tried to make the theoretical argument that a woman was incapable of ruling. But in practice it was here, on the very brink of power, that the ways in which Matilda did not 'fit' the crown she claimed began to be articulated for the first time. "All chroniclers agree that in her hour of victory she displayed an intolerable pride and wilfulness," one historian of the period remarks, and support for that suggestion is not hard to find.

"She at once put on an extremely arrogant demeanour instead of the modest gait and bearing proper to the gentle sex", the anonymous author of the *Gesta Stephani* (the 'Deeds of Stephen') complained, while Henry of Huntingdon declared censoriously that "she was lifted up into an insufferable arrogance ... and alienated the hearts of almost everyone."

This has become the defining account of the difficulties Matilda faced at the crucial moment when the kingdom lay within her hands. However, closer scrutiny suggests that the situation was more complex than simply that (as another historian suggests) "an aspect of her character which had not so far been apparent ... let her down."

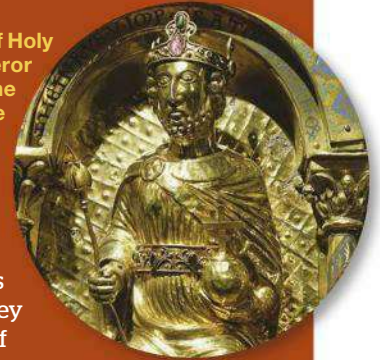
Matilda was trying to become Queen of England not in the conventional sense of a king's wife but in the unprecedented form of a female king. Kings were – and were required to be – supremely commanding and authoritative. But when Matilda tried to command her subjects with her new royal authority, she found herself condemned as unfemininely wilful and unnaturally

Matilda: life of a kingly queen

Matilda is born to Edith, daughter of King Malcolm III of Scotland, two years after her father, Henry I, took the throne of England following the death of his brother, William Rufus

1102

A gilt figure of Holy Roman Emperor Heinrich V on the Charlemagne Shrine (1215) in Aachen Cathedral



Following the death of Heinrich in 1125, Matilda returns to England. Her father commands his Anglo-Norman nobles to swear an oath that they will support his daughter as his successor if he dies without a male heir

1110

1127

Matilda makes the long journey to the duchy of Lower Lorraine to meet her future husband, the Holy Roman Emperor Heinrich (or Henry) V, whom she marries in January 1114

1128

Matilda marries Geoffrey, Count of Anjou

1133

Five years after her marriage, Matilda gives birth to her first son, Henry, in Anjou

1135

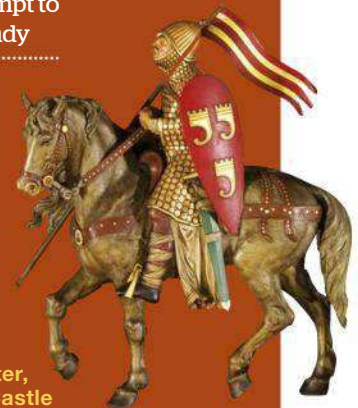
Henry I dies. Heavily pregnant, Matilda is unable to travel. Her cousin Stephen of Blois races to Winchester to be crowned King of England

1136

Stephen fails in his attempt to seize control of Normandy

1138

Matilda's illegitimate brother Robert, Earl of Gloucester, publicly renounces his allegiance to Stephen and declares for his sister



Robert, Earl of Gloucester, on a carving in Cardiff Castle

1139

Matilda returns to England and establishes a power base in the west

1141

Geoffrey of Anjou conquers Normandy in Matilda's name. By the end of the year, Stephen no longer holds a single Norman stronghold

1144

Stephen is defeated and captured at the battle of Lincoln. Following preparations for Matilda's coronation, Londoners drive her out of Westminster. At the siege of Winchester Robert of Gloucester is captured, then exchanged for the captive Stephen

1148

The Treaty of Winchester is signed. Stephen is to remain king until his death, upon which Henry succeeds as lawful heir to the throne of England

1153

Matilda leaves England to return to Normandy

1154

Stephen dies and Henry is crowned King Henry II - 19 years after the death of his grandfather, Henry I



King Henry II's Great Seal

Matilda dies in September and is buried in Bec Abbey, Normandy

1167

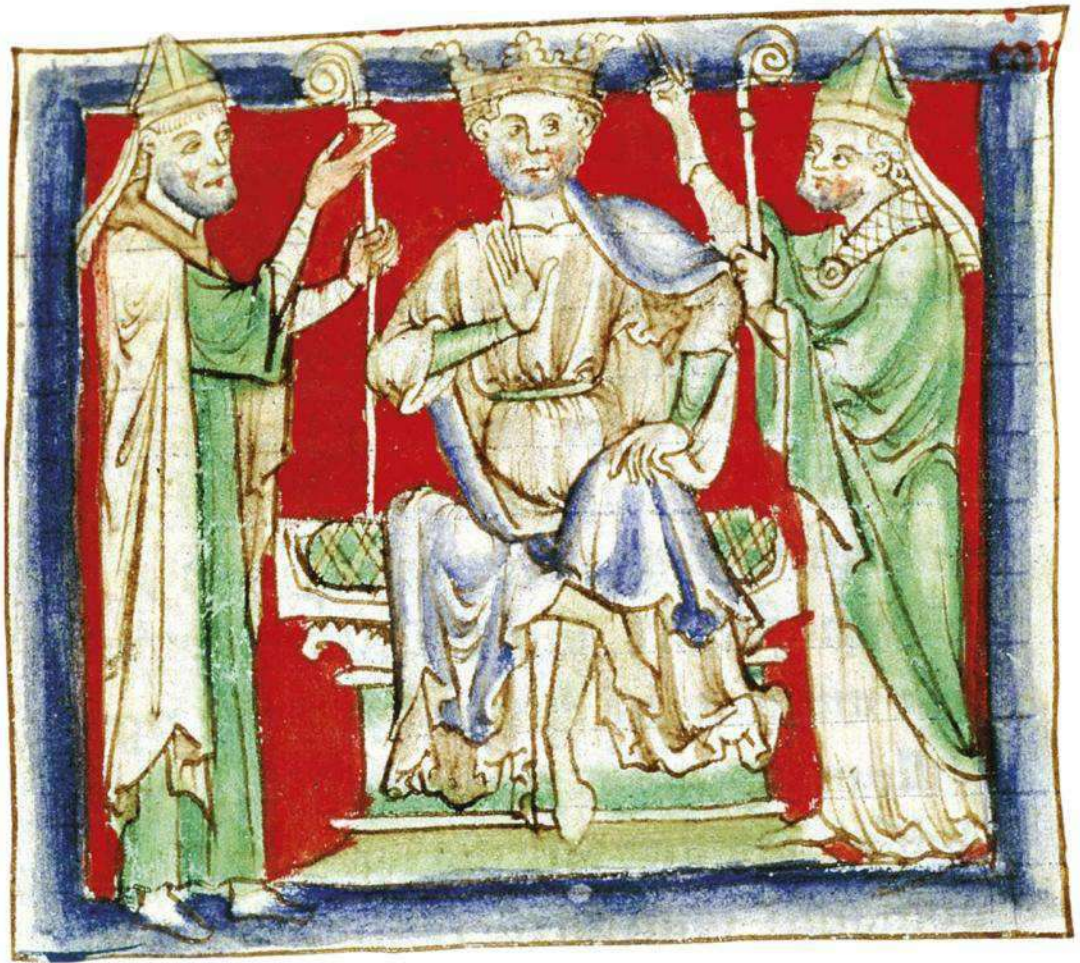


King Stephen I holding a falcon



King Henry II, **united the legitimacy of his mother's claim** with his own ability to embody the functions of kingship in uncomplicatedly male form

RIGHT: Matilda's son, English King Henry II, depicted in a miniature in the *Flores Historiarum* (c1250) of Matthew Paris



domineering. "... she did not rise respectfully, as she should have, when [the chief men of the whole kingdom] bowed before her," the *Gesta Stephani* went on, "or agree to what they asked, but repeatedly sent them away with contumely, rebuffing them by an arrogant answer and refusing to hearken to their words; and by this time she no longer relied on their advice, as she should have, and had promised them, but arranged everything as she herself thought fit and according to her own arbitrary will."

The arrogance of a woman

What this boils down to, when issues of style and substance are disentangled, is that Matilda did not do exactly what her advisers told her. It is hard to imagine quite what her father would have said to the suggestion that his counsellors should have the last word in his government – or indeed what he would have had to do to be accused of "insufferable arrogance". The expectation of unquestioning obedience, and the punishment of those who did not comply with his commands, had been indissoluble elements of Henry's kingship.

How, then, could Matilda achieve an authority to match her father's if she could employ only the "modest gait and bearing

proper to the gentle sex" to command her kingdom? It wasn't, in other words, that her fledgling regime was crippled by the sudden revelation of previously undetected personal flaws. Instead, she was taking her first steps in the new persona of a female monarch, and found herself stumbling over the implicit contradictions between being a woman and being a king.

Matilda never got her coronation. The Londoners – whose overwhelming economic interest in the trade route through Stephen's lands on the continent predisposed them to support her imprisoned rival – drove her from Westminster before the crown could be placed on her head. And her "intolerable pride and wilfulness" disappeared as rapidly as they had come.

So far was she, in fact, from being intractably arrogant that what turned out to be 19 long years of civil war were finally ended by Matilda's acutely pragmatic realisation that she could achieve victory for her cause only by retiring from the fray, leaving the country in 1148. She gave up her claim to her son, who took the throne as King Henry II after Stephen's death in 1154, uniting the legitimacy of his mother's claim with his own ability to embody the functions of kingship in uncomplicatedly male form.

Matilda's story left a complex and ambiguous precedent in English politics. Women could pass on the throne to their male heirs – that much was clear – and no principle had been explicitly established to exclude them from the succession. But there was no neutral political ground on which a woman could stand to exercise power that contemporaries (and historians since) assumed was 'naturally' male. This is a conclusion that remains as thought-provoking now, amid the supposedly 'new politics' of the 21st century, as it was 900 years ago.

Helen Castor is a historian of medieval England and Bye-Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth** by Helen Castor (Faber and Faber, 2010)
- **The Empress Matilda** by Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford, 1991)
- **The Lioness Roared: The Problems of Female Rule in English History** by Charles Beem (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

► **Turn the page** to explore eight places connected with Matilda and her battle for the throne with Stephen

The Anarchy: Eight places to visit

David Crouch and Rob Attar explore English sites linked to Stephen and Matilda's fight for the crown



1 Arundel Castle, West Sussex

2 Lincoln Castle, Lincoln

3 Westminster Abbey, London

4 Wolvesey Castle, Winchester

5 Ludgershall Castle, Wiltshire

6 Oxford Castle, Oxford

7 Church of St John the Baptist, Devizes

8 Wallingford Castle, Oxfordshire

1 Arundel Castle

WEST SUSSEX

Where Matilda landed

Matilda, Henry I's only legitimate daughter, was born in 1102, and acquired the title of empress through her marriage to Holy Roman Emperor Heinrich (Henry) V in 1114. Heinrich died in 1125 and Matilda married her second husband, Geoffrey of Anjou, three years later. Meanwhile, Henry had designated Matilda his heir in the presence of several notables, including his nephew Stephen of Blois.

But when Henry died in 1135, probably from dysentery, Stephen reneged on his oath and seized the crown. Accepted by the majority of the English establishment, initially his position was too secure for Matilda to consider asserting a challenge from her base in France. In time, though, Stephen's political ineptitude antagonised many leading noblemen, notably Matilda's half-brother Robert of Gloucester. Magnates began rising against Stephen, compelling him to use military force to assert his authority.

This was the background to Matilda's landing in England, accompanied by Robert of Gloucester, on 30 September 1139. She was invited to stay at Arundel Castle where her stepmother, Queen Adeliza, was living with her new husband, William d'Albini (or d'Aubigny), Earl of Arundel.



Arundel, Matilda's initial base of operations

Confusingly, d'Albini was loyal to Stephen, prompting speculation that Adeliza had hoped to broker some kind of peace deal between the king and her stepdaughter.

Robert of Gloucester swiftly departed to his Bristol stronghold, leaving Matilda at Arundel. Stephen marched on Arundel Castle where he encountered no resistance from the earl and his wife, who opted to avoid confrontation. But with Matilda at his mercy, Stephen dithered. As she had not yet come out as his enemy he felt unable to imprison her; instead he decided to allow her safe passage to the west of England, where she was able to team up with Robert. At least this way, it was reasoned, the king's enemies were all in the same place.

When Matilda visited, Arundel Castle was a relatively recent construct. It had come into existence shortly after the Norman conquest, and the stone keep was a 12th-century addition. The castle is now a popular tourist attraction, surrounded by lavish gardens.

► arundelcastle.org

3 Westminster Abbey LONDON

Where Matilda failed to be crowned

With Stephen in leg irons in Bristol, Matilda sought to become the new ruler. She secured church backing at a legatine council on 7 April 1141, then prepared to have herself made queen. A coronation was planned at Westminster Abbey.

Yet Matilda was far from universally accepted. She enjoyed strong allegiance from the west of England, but elsewhere the figures that mattered were often hesitant in their support, or even openly opposed to her. The archbishop of Canterbury and the pope refused to recognise her as Stephen's replacement. In a precarious position, Matilda does not appear to have helped her cause. Having been an empress from her youth she seems to have had an exalted view of herself, which could often be interpreted as arrogance. Like Stephen, she lacked the necessary people skills to reach out to those whose approval she required.

Her plans to be crowned that June failed. An army raised by Stephen's wife, Matilda of Boulogne, arrived at the Thames and threatened the city of London. The people of London also rose up in opposition to the empress, who had displeased them with the imposition of taxes and her favouritism to her West Country followers. Before the coronation could take place, Londoners stormed out of the city to attack Westminster. Matilda fled, her plans in disarray.

Legend has it that the land around the abbey's current site has been a place of worship since around AD 600, when the Saxon king, Sæberht, built a church here. The current Gothic abbey was constructed by Henry III in the 1240s, and the western towers were added c1745. All but two English/British sovereigns since William the Conqueror were crowned here.

► westminster-abbey.org

2 Lincoln Castle LINCOLN – Where Stephen was captured

Lincoln Castle is another early Norman creation, dating back to 1068. In late 1140 it was held by Ranulf, Earl of Chester. He had offended the townspeople with his behaviour, to the extent that complaints reached Stephen, who headed for Lincoln and commenced a siege.

Unfortunately for Stephen, Ranulf's father-in-law was Robert of Gloucester, who appeared on the scene with an army that contained, according to a

contemporary source, "a dreadful and unendurable mass of Welshmen". In the battle that followed on 2 February 1141, Stephen's forces were overwhelmed. The king seems to have been outnumbered and the Welsh soldiers scared off his cavalry. Thinking the day was lost, many of the mounted troops fled, leaving Stephen to bravely fight on.

A rock thrown at the back of his helmet brought him down and he was captured.

The seizure of the king by Robert, Earl of Gloucester turned a minor dispute into a major event. Matilda suddenly found herself in a strong position to seize the throne.

► lincolncastle.com



Lincoln Castle was the scene of Stephen's most humiliating defeat

ALAMY



Matilda was forced to flee Westminster Abbey in 1141

4 Wolvesey Castle WINCHESTER

Where the tide turned against Matilda

Stephen's brother Henry of Blois held the influential post of bishop of Winchester. In spite of family loyalties, on hearing of Stephen's capture he agreed to come over to Matilda's side. Nonetheless, he was clearly not wholly convinced by the empress, and Stephen's wife Matilda persuaded him to throw in his lot with her.

In response to Henry's defection, the Empress Matilda marched on Winchester. Here she was met by an army led by the other Matilda, alongside William of Ypres and a band of Flemish mercenaries. This time the battle went against the empress. She managed to flee the defeat but her key ally Robert of Gloucester was captured on 14 September.

The story of the fighting in Winchester is somewhat unclear but Wolvesey Castle, then the bishop's palace, was involved. The ruins that remain nowadays are largely the result of building work that was undertaken by Henry of Blois in the 12th century.

► english-heritage.org.uk

The ruins of Wolvesey Castle in Hampshire



5 Ludgershall Castle WILTSHIRE

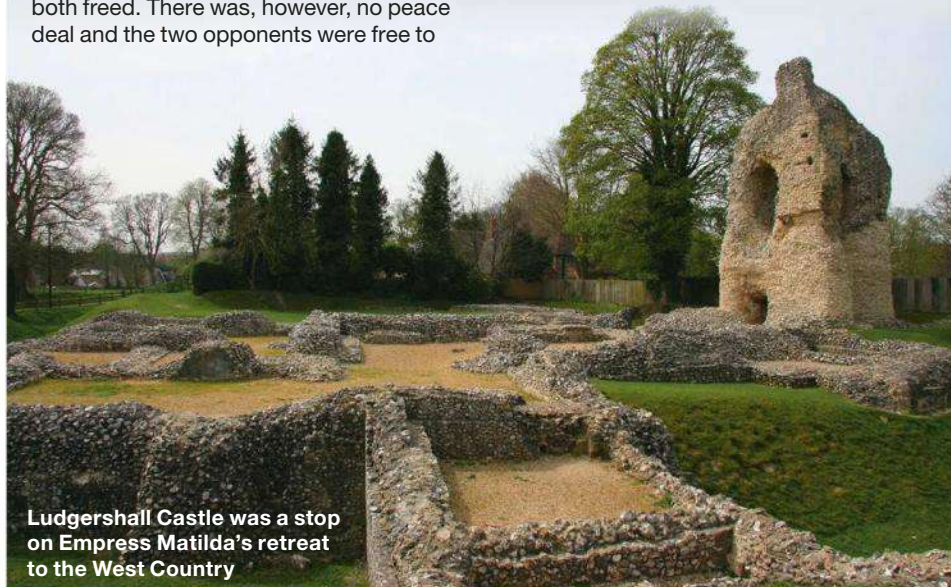
Where Matilda fled after the rout at Wolvesey

After the catastrophe in Winchester, Matilda stopped at Ludgershall on her way back to her heartland in the west of England. On her journey back Matilda was so exhausted that she had to be carried on a litter, sparking the legend that she travelled in a coffin. The loss of Robert was a major blow to Matilda's cause, and negotiations soon began for his release, resulting in a swap deal whereby the Earl of Gloucester and King Stephen were both freed. There was, however, no peace deal and the two opponents were free to

continue their enmity as before.

Now ruined, Ludgershall Castle was a late-11th-century creation. It was taken into royal control around the start of the 12th century and was then enhanced by King John 100 years later. Ludgershall was frequently used as a hunting retreat but eventually fell into disrepair. The castle was dismantled in the Tudor period.

► english-heritage.org.uk



Ludgershall Castle was a stop on Empress Matilda's retreat to the West Country

6 Oxford Castle

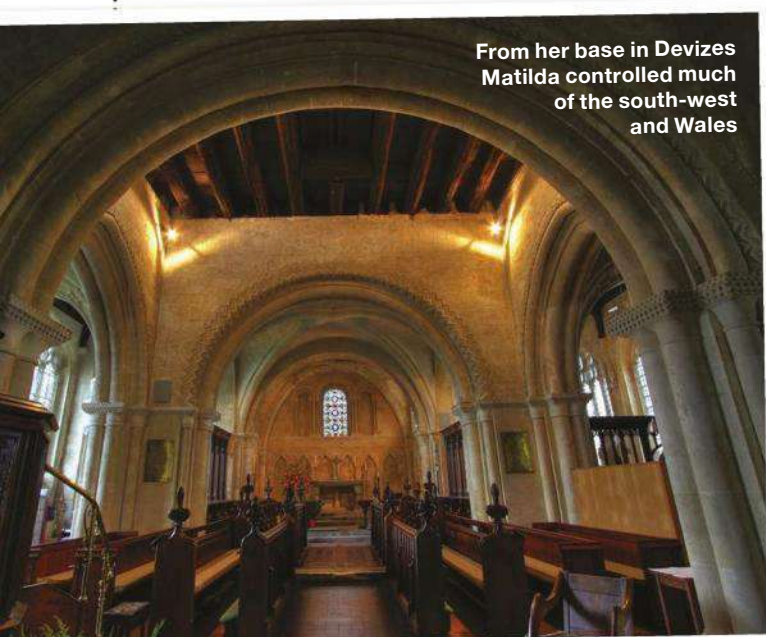
OXFORD

Where Matilda escaped Stephen's clutches

Stephen was buoyed by his release and set about solidifying his reign. A church council in December 1141 again accepted him as king, but he was still unable to dominate his kingdom as he desired. Stephen felt compelled to continue his campaigns, beginning in Yorkshire in 1142 with a mission to bring a couple of troublesome earls to order. But the biggest obstacle to his supremacy remained Matilda in the south-west.

In the autumn of 1142 she was vulnerable. The empress's husband had refused to aid her cause because of his commitments in Normandy, and to compound matters Robert of Gloucester had temporarily departed for the continent. Stephen took the opportunity to besiege Oxford Castle, where Matilda was then based. Without Robert's forces, the garrison at Oxford was on the verge of surrender.

Then, in December, one of the most dramatic incidents in this civil war occurred. Matilda, realising that the game was up, sneaked away from the castle accompanied by a small group of knights. Dressed in white to blend in with the winter snow, they made it



From her base in Devizes Matilda controlled much of the south-west and Wales

7 Church of St John the Baptist DEVIZES

Where Matilda set up her court

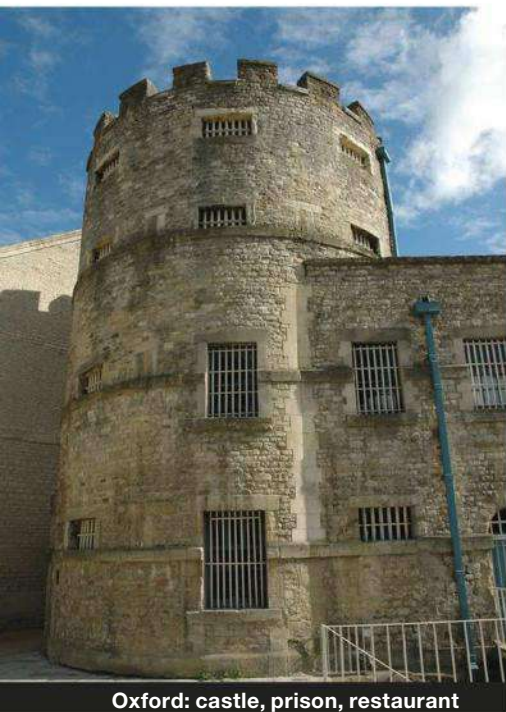
After her escape from Oxford, Matilda made for Devizes in Wiltshire, where she elected to stay. The robust stone castle in the town had been under the control of the bishop of Salisbury rather than Robert of Gloucester, so she was able to exert her own authority there.

Entrenched in Devizes, Matilda was strong enough to control much of the West Country and parts of Wales. In these areas she issued charters and minted her own coins. She had, however, little chance of dislodging Stephen, and any slim hopes she may have

entertained evaporated with the death of Robert of Gloucester in 1147. The following year, Matilda returned to France where she lived out the rest of her days.

The castle where Matilda resided in Devizes no longer stands, having been replaced by a 19th-century model. However, its former chapel, built in 1130, does still remain as the Church of St John the Baptist. It still has its original sanctuary, chancel and crossing, and is widely praised as one of the finest Norman churches in the region.

► stjohnwithstmary.org.uk



Oxford: castle, prison, restaurant

across the frozen Thames and sped away to safety. Shortly afterwards the castle garrison surrendered, but the biggest prize had eluded Stephen.

As with many other fortresses dotted around the country in the mid 12th century, Oxford Castle was created at the dawn of the Norman conquest. For much of its existence it served as a prison, a role it fulfilled till 1996. The site is now a heritage attraction, hotel and restaurant quarter.

► oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk

8 Wallingford Castle OXFORDSHIRE

Where battle was not joined

Matilda might have gone, but Stephen was not to be allowed much peace. The empress's young son Henry aspired to the throne of England, and made two expeditions to the country, in 1147 and 1149. On the second of these, Henry formed an alliance with his great-uncle King David of Scotland. Together they attempted to invade the north of England but their plan was scuppered by the swift arrival of Stephen's forces.

Stephen had his own plans for the English crown: he hoped that his son Eustace would succeed him. However, such a move offered little prospect of appeasing the supporters of Matilda and Henry, nor of ending the civil strife. England's magnates had long grown weary of the constant fighting, and by



Wallingford Castle, where peace broke out after nobles grew tired of the dispute

the late 1140s were already negotiating with each other to find a means of resolving the dispute. One proposed solution was to allow Stephen to continue as king for his lifetime but to install Henry as his heir.

After an interlude, when he was occupied in France, Henry reappeared in England in 1153. His troops met those of Stephen's at Malmesbury. There, in foul weather, the king's attack was aborted, while in the background the voices calling for a treaty were growing in strength. That August the foes met once more at Wallingford Castle, where Stephen's men had been closing in on a former stronghold of Matilda's. This time the two armies refused to fight, and Stephen and Henry began to contemplate a deal.

The situation was greatly simplified by Eustace's untimely death that summer, removing a key obstacle to Henry's succession. Towards the end of the year, an agreement was reached in Winchester: Stephen was free to continue his reign

untroubled, but with Henry adopted as his heir. The king does not appear to have been too displeased with the situation, and was often seen with Henry at his side in subsequent months. Sadly, Stephen did not have long to enjoy this newfound harmony: in October 1154 he was taken ill and died in Dover Priory, leaving the way clear for Matilda's son to be crowned Henry II.

Wallingford Castle, built around 1067, continued to be in use until the 16th century. It fell into partial decay but was then refortified and held by the royalists during the Civil War. After the parliamentary victory the castle was demolished in 1652 under Cromwell's orders. Now, peaceful ruins remain. **H**

► earthtrust.org.uk

Words by Rob Attar. Historical advisor: Professor **David Crouch**, author of *The Reign of King Stephen* (Routledge, 2000)



Meeting of minds

This scene from Jean Froissart's *Chronicles* shows Richard II sailing down the Thames to negotiate with peasant leaders. Could his offer to meet their demands have actually been genuine?



Did Richard II side with the peasants?

Juliet Barker explains how the 1381 Peasants' Revolt may have found an unlikely champion – the boy-king himself

Richard II stood in a turret of the Tower of London and anxiously surveyed the scenes of chaos unfolding below him. It was Thursday 13 June, the feast of Corpus Christi, 1381, and his capital city was in the grip of the greatest popular revolt that England had ever seen. Rebels from the Home Counties, led by the people of Kent and Essex where the rebellion had begun, had joined forces with a volatile London mob – and now smoke and flames rose on every side.

On the Strand, the magnificent Savoy Palace of John of Gaunt (Richard's influential uncle), one of the wonders of medieval London, had been thoroughly sacked and was burning out of control. The great preceptory of the Knights Hospitaller at Clerkenwell – headquarters of the order throughout England, Wales and Scotland – had been looted and torched. The same fate befell the archbishop of Canterbury's manor of Lambeth. All around the Temple, home to the city's lawyers, archives had been ransacked and legal documents, books and records thrown onto bonfires in the streets.

Houses and offices belonging to lawyers and royal officials were being set on fire, demolished or stripped of their roofs and exposed to the elements. Royal jails had been

broken open and prisoners set free, their numbers swelling the hordes that surged through the streets and were now gathering beneath the walls of the Tower to demand that their king should come out to meet them and grant them redress for their grievances.

It was a terrifying situation for any monarch to face, let alone a boy of just 14, but Richard lacked neither courage nor a sense of his own regality. Earlier that day, in an attempt to defuse the situation and prevent the rebels entering the city, he had sailed from the Tower to Rotherhithe on the south bank of the Thames to speak to them in person. But at the last minute Richard's councillors had taken fright at the size of the crowds gathered on the riverbank, turned their boats around and fled back to the safety of the Tower, carrying Richard with them.

In their determination to secure their interview with the king, the rebels had therefore taken matters into their own hands, storming their way through Southwark, across London Bridge and into the city itself, wreaking destruction as they went.

As the violence escalated, the royal council decided that there was no other option but to conciliate the rebels by offering them the face-to-face meeting they demanded. It was agreed that if they would withdraw to Mile End, just outside the city walls, Richard would come to them the next morning

to answer their petitions in person. This was a risky strategy, given the council's reluctance to allow Richard to disembark at Rotherhithe. Now he would have to ride through the turbulent streets of the city into the heart of the rebel encampment. From the outset, however, the rebels had consistently proclaimed their loyalty to Richard personally: even their rallying cry was "for King Richard and the true commons".

The object of their ire was not the king himself but those they felt had abused his authority: John of Gaunt, who was believed to have designs on his nephew's throne and whose military failures had allowed the French to make frequent attacks on English coastal towns and shipping; royal councillors such as Simon Sudbury (the chancellor and archbishop) and Robert Hales (the treasurer and prior of the Knights Hospitaller), who were responsible for unprecedented levels of taxation and the heavy-handed enforcement of the poll-tax collection; corrupt sheriffs, justices of the peace and lawyers who manipulated the administration of manor and shire for their own personal gain.

Even so, it is a measure of how rapidly and sharply the situation had deteriorated since the abortive Rotherhithe meeting that the king's councillors were now prepared to put his person at the mercy of a volatile and possibly angry crowd.

Radical concessions

The conventional view of the Mile End conference is that it was a cynical ploy conceived to remove the country rebels from the streets of the capital and buy the government time to restore order. Any promises the king might be forced to make to persuade his rebellious subjects to return quietly to their homes could be retracted later on the grounds that they had been extorted under duress and therefore could not be legally binding.

What makes this explanation even more plausible is the astonishingly radical and far-reaching nature of the concessions Richard made to the rebels that day. These went far beyond sanctioning the punishment of corrupt royal officials and pardoning the rebels for any offences they had committed. They envisaged no less than the transformation of the very structures upon which medieval English society was built.

First and foremost was the abolition of serfdom, both personal and tenurial. Henceforth every man, woman and child would be free to live, travel and work where they chose and own what they earned or acquired outright without being subject to their lords' dues and demands. Even more

important, since it affected a much larger proportion of the population, was the abolition of the very concept of customary land. In future, landlords could charge rents of only 4d an acre, or less if less had been paid in the past. No personal services such as harvesting or carrying could be required.

Equally radical was Richard's concession that all his subjects were to be free to buy and sell within every city, borough, market town or other place within the realm. This swept away all the closely guarded monopolies and privileges upon which the economies of those places depended, making it impossible for them to charge tolls and fines on outsiders.

Personal freedom, free land and free trade: in granting these rebel demands, Richard endorsed a revolution so profound that it is impossible to believe he was sincere – after all, serfdom was so entrenched that it would linger on in England well into the 16th century. Surely, then, Richard had no intention of being held to his promises, and the Mile End meeting was simply a charade to gain time to suppress the revolt?

The king's attitude towards the rebels is well known. "Rustics you were and rustics you are still," the chronicler Thomas Walsingham reports him saying later to an Essex deputation seeking confirmation of their liberties. "You will remain in bondage, not as before but incomparably harsher. For as long as we live... we will strive with mind, strength and goods to suppress you so that the rigour of your servitude will be an example to posterity."

It therefore seems to fly in the face of common sense to argue that Richard genuinely sympathised with the rebels and willingly granted their petitions – but I believe there is a strong case to be made for this view.

There are two reasons for this. The first is that the obvious time to cancel all Richard's concessions was the next day, Saturday 15 June, immediately after the meeting at Smithfield between the king and those rebels,

mainly from Kent, who had refused to leave London until their more radical demands had been met. The assassination at Smithfield of the captain and spokesman of the rebellion in Kent, Wat Tyler (by the mayor of London together with one of the king's esquires), and Richard's remarkably courageous actions in claiming the leadership of the rebels, guiding them away from the field and successfully urging them to go back to their homes, removed any need to maintain a pretence that their demands would be met.

Yet not only did Richard fail to cancel the grants he had already made but his clerks continued to issue new charters granting them their freedom, sealed with the Great Seal of England, to those communities and counties that asked for them. What's more, it wasn't until 2 July – a full 18 days later – that Richard finally revoked the liberties he had granted at Mile End.

Face-to-face meeting

The most likely reason for this delay is that the king himself was reluctant to reverse his decision. Richard was very young. At Mile End he had had his first opportunity to talk directly with his subjects and hear their complaints about the corruption and oppression of the regime over which he presided – and it should not be forgotten that these plaintiffs were not all inarticulate, illiterate, poverty-stricken 'peasants', but included educated, sometimes wealthy, village officials, artisans, burgesses, members of the gentry and even members of parliament.

In granting them their liberties Richard acted solely on his own royal authority (a moment of empowerment for him as much as it was for them) only to have his councillors round on him and tell him that he must go back on his word. It is significant that the revocation was finally issued under the watchful eye of the new hard-line chief justice, Robert Tresilian, who had escorted the young king to Essex to watch him preside over the trials of the rebels.

The delay in revoking the charters is not, on its own, sufficient to demonstrate that Richard genuinely sympathised with the rebels' desire for liberty, but there is further compelling evidence. In November 1381 the treasurer explained in his opening speech at the first parliament to meet after the revolt that Richard had been "constrained" to abolish serfdom "knowing full well that he should not do so... but that he did for the best, to stop and put an end to the [rebels'] clamour and malice". His councillors had then persuaded him to repeal his grants as being made "under compulsion, contrary to reason, law, and good faith".

Richard's concessions envisaged the transformation of the very structures upon which
medieval English society was built

Richard's capital city was in the grip of the greatest **popular revolt that England had ever seen**



TOPFOTO

Put to the sword A late 15th-century manuscript depicting the killing of the chancellor Simon Sudbury (left) and the treasurer Robert Hales (right) during the Peasants' Revolt. Their role in enforcing collection of an unpopular poll tax made them obvious targets for the protesters

But what came next was extraordinary. Through his treasurer Richard appealed to parliament over the heads of his councillors, asking them the direct question: "Whether it seems to you that he acted well in that repeal and pleased you or not. For he says that if you wish to enfranchise and make free the said villeins by your common agreement, as he has been informed some of you wish to do, he will assent to your request."

This, surely, was a clear statement of Richard's own view that serfdom should be abolished, and an attempt to override the royal council's advice. It was a highly unusual and deeply personal appeal – not the sort of thing normally to be found in an opening speech – and Richard had no need to make such a gratuitous offer unless he hoped, or believed, that parliament might be persuaded to reinstate his charters of freedom. Unfortunately for the boy-king, parliament fully agreed with his council. Both houses responded "with one voice" in a robustly worded rebuke, informing Richard that the repeal was "well made" and he had no authority to free any serfs "without the assent of those who had the chief interest in the

matter; and they had never agreed to it, either voluntarily or otherwise, nor would they ever do so, even if it were their dying day".

The irony was that Richard's readiness to accept the rebels' demands actually made a bad situation worse. Although his concessions at Mile End successfully persuaded large numbers of rebels to return home, they did so proclaiming their newly won freedoms and telling everyone they met along the way that they had the king's sympathy and, more importantly, his authority for what they had done. This encouraged others to attack their oppressors and destroy the records that perpetuated their servitude.

Unlikely rebels

Worse still, as a direct result of the 18-day delay in revoking the liberties granted at Mile End, many more people and places were drawn into the revolt, believing that they had the king's personal mandate. Many unlikely 'rebels' therefore committed acts that would later be defined as crimes or even treason once the king changed his mind, or had it changed for him. Geoffrey Cobbe, for instance, a Cambridgeshire gentleman, proclaimed that he was acting on the king's commission when he supervised a two-day auction of the goods and property of a corrupt local official.

Richard de Leycester, a prosperous shop-owner in Ely, took over the abbey pulpit after learning of the Mile End concessions so that he could tell his fellow townsmen "the things to be performed on the part of the king and the commonalty against traitors and other unfaithful". He even had chancery letters of protection for his person and property, perhaps issued at Mile End – but these were not enough to save him from execution.

William Grindecobbe indisputably had royal letters, granted at Mile End on 15 June, ordering the abbot of St Albans to hand over the abbey's charters to Grindecobbe's fellow townsmen. Their 'revolt' was entirely peaceable: not a single monk or abbey employee was harmed, though some properties were demolished. Nevertheless, Chief Justice Tresilian hanged 15 of them, including Grindecobbe, and condemned a further 80 townsmen to imprisonment.

If we accept that Richard was not duplicitous in his dealings with the rebels and that he genuinely sympathised with their desire for freedom, then our interpretation of the great revolt needs some adjustment.

Such a scenario would explain why so many people who would never otherwise

have considered joining a 'rebellion' – by its very definition an act of defiance against royal authority – were prepared to assist in building this brave new world and were shocked to find themselves labelled rebels.

Part of the problem in suppressing the revolt was that, until Richard actually revoked his concessions, none of those who would normally have organised resistance to the uprising could be certain that they had the authority to act. Their failure to make their move sooner was a major factor in allowing the rebellion to spread unchallenged across the country. It was not until the end of June, a full two weeks after the events at Mile End and Smithfield, that detachments of soldiers were finally mobilised to restore order in the shires. And it was early July – after Richard's revocation of his concessions – before commissioners with sweeping powers to crush the revolt began to arrest, imprison and try those accused of taking part in it.

As for Richard himself, we can perhaps see that the seeds of his later downfall were sown during the great revolt. He never forgave those on his council and in parliament who had forced him to renege on his commitments at Mile End. As soon as he came of age he determined to rule alone, surrounding himself with new-made men who owed their position to him, rather than those whom he held responsible for mismanaging his realm during his minority.

By asserting his royal prerogative to rule alone, Richard set himself on a collision course with his peers that would end in 1399 with a military coup by his own cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, who seized the throne for himself. The following year Richard would die in prison, almost certainly murdered in the wake of a failed rebellion by his supporters.

Richard may have alienated the aristocracy whom he had excluded from his councils but he continued to enjoy the loyalty of his 'true commons'. Years after his death, the idea that he had sympathised with their plight was still powerful enough to make his name once more a rallying cry for opponents of both Henry IV and Henry V. It was yet another legacy of the unlikely bond between the boy-king and the rebels of 1381. **H**

Juliet Barker is a biographer and historian whose books include histories of the Brontës and Agincourt

DISCOVER MORE

BOOK

► **England, Arise: The People, the King and the Great Revolt of 1381** by Juliet Barker (Little, Brown, 2014)

For years after his death, the idea that Richard had sympathised with their plight was powerful enough **to make his name a rallying cry for rebels**



A marked man

A portrait of Richard II in the 1390s when the king was increasingly at odds with England's aristocracy

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DON'T MISS ISSUE 2

Kathryn Warner on... **How to relate to medieval rulers**

“Edward I once lost a bet with his laundress. Such delightful snippets help round out the personalities of long-dead monarchs”

In an era when history TV and publishing schedules can seem saturated with tales of Tudors, you might be forgiven for thinking that English history began and ended with Henry VIII and his six wives. So thoroughly has that era been mined that I’ve sometimes wondered when someone will spot a gap in the market for a book called *Anne Boleyn: The Missing Ten Minutes*.

Conversely, most of the 18 kings of England (and their queens) who ruled between 1066 and 1485 fail to attract even a fraction of the attention that Henry and his marital exploits do – even though their lives and reigns were as full of drama, passion, conflict, intrigue, battles, hideous executions and bloody revenge as anything the 16th century witnessed.

Perhaps only Eleanor of Aquitaine – a great heiress who lived for 80 years, queen consecutively of Louis VII of France and Henry II of England, mother of two English kings, grandmother of European royalty – comes anywhere close to the fame and exposure of Anne Boleyn. (Read more about Eleanor on page 56.)

Take Eleanor’s grandson, Henry III. His reign of 56 years is the fourth-longest in English history behind Elizabeth II, Victoria and George III – yet mention of his name is likely to elicit little more than a puzzled “who?” from most people.

Another largely forgotten medieval monarch is Edward II. Today that fascinating and much-misunderstood 14th-century king is one of my particular subjects of interest – I’ve written biographies of both Edward and his queen, Isabella of France (pictured right). But I’m somewhat ashamed to admit that I completed two degrees in medieval history almost entirely unaware of Edward – except as the king who loved Piers Gaveston and who reputedly died the victim of an (almost certainly mythical) red-hot poker.

Some kings and queens, it seems, have been consigned to obscurity. Until now, that is: in the second decade of the 21st century, more and more biographies of previously half-forgotten monarchs are being written, published and read. It’s a great time to be a fan of medieval royalty.

One significant reason for this obscurity is the paucity of sources that can help us reconstruct the personalities and personal lives of our medieval monarchs. When studying an age long before diaries or newspapers, or even much in the way of



Kathryn Warner is the author of *Edward II: The Unconventional King* (Amberley, 2014) and *Isabella of France: The Rebel Queen* (Amberley, 2016)

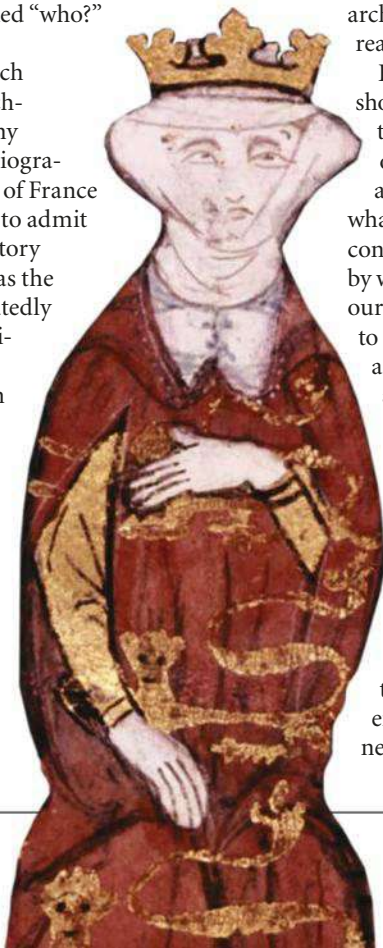
private letters, is it possible to flesh out kings and queens as anything more than one-dimensional cardboard cutouts? I believe that it is – and that there are still plenty of alluring nuggets of information to be unearthed by the patient historian.

My own research into the chamber accounts of Edward II (ruled 1307–27) reveals that he invited shipwrights to stay with him and carpenters to travel with him, and that he enjoyed chatting to fishermen. An entry in the chancery rolls – a useful and rich primary source often wrongly considered dry as dust – shows that Richard II (r1377–99) was something of a numismatist, ordering old coins to be brought for him to examine and admire.

Extant records of payments to merchants reveal that Philippa of Hainault, queen of Edward III, enjoyed wearing gowns embroidered with baboons, and that her grandson Henry IV (r1399–1413) once wore a tunic embroidered with toads. The wardrobe accounts of the ‘Hammer of the Scots’ himself, Edward I (ruled 1272–1307), tell us that he once lost a bet with his laundress – the forfeit being that he had to give her one of his prized warhorses. Such delightful snippets help to round out the personalities of those long-dead monarchs, adding colour and detail and creating images of real human beings to whom we can relate.

Even what we do know about medieval monarchs shouldn’t be accepted without question. The truth of their lives frequently lies buried beneath centuries of myth and invention. Often even well-accepted accounts don’t hold up to close scrutiny: much of what we think we know about them is sheer fabrication, contrived either by hostile chroniclers of their own era or by writers – of fiction, non-fiction and screenplays – of ours. It behoves all of us who work as historians to refer to the primary sources, to be as objective and unbiased as we can, to strip away the myths, misunderstandings and slanted writing, and try to present these men and women as they really were.

There’s the red-hot poker that, legend has it, ended the life of Edward II. And indeed, almost all of the long-accepted narrative of the life of Edward’s queen Isabella of France (died 1358) comprises stories invented in the 19th and 20th centuries, and peddled to an unwitting audience as ‘fact’. Doubtless biographers of other figures would say something similar of their subjects. Yet the lives of those medieval royals were dramatic enough and fascinating enough to enthrall with no need for embellishment. **H**



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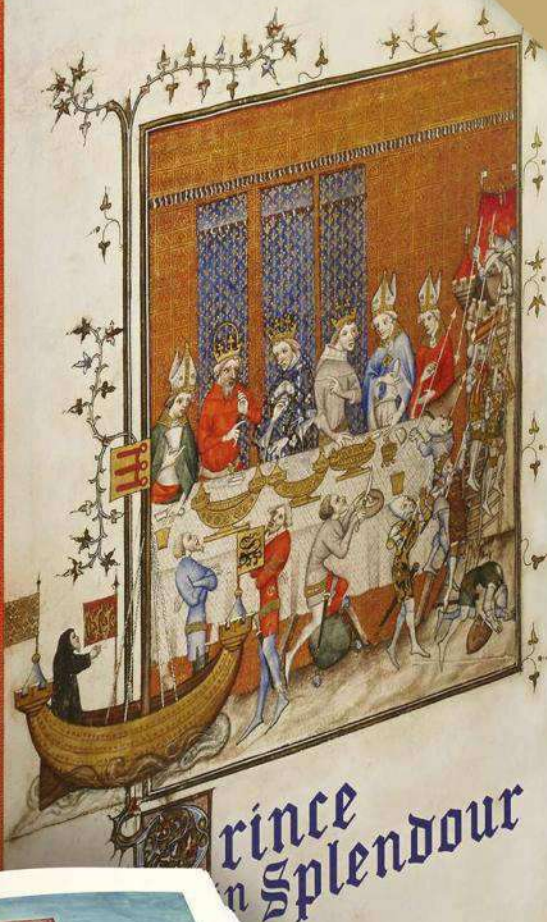
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